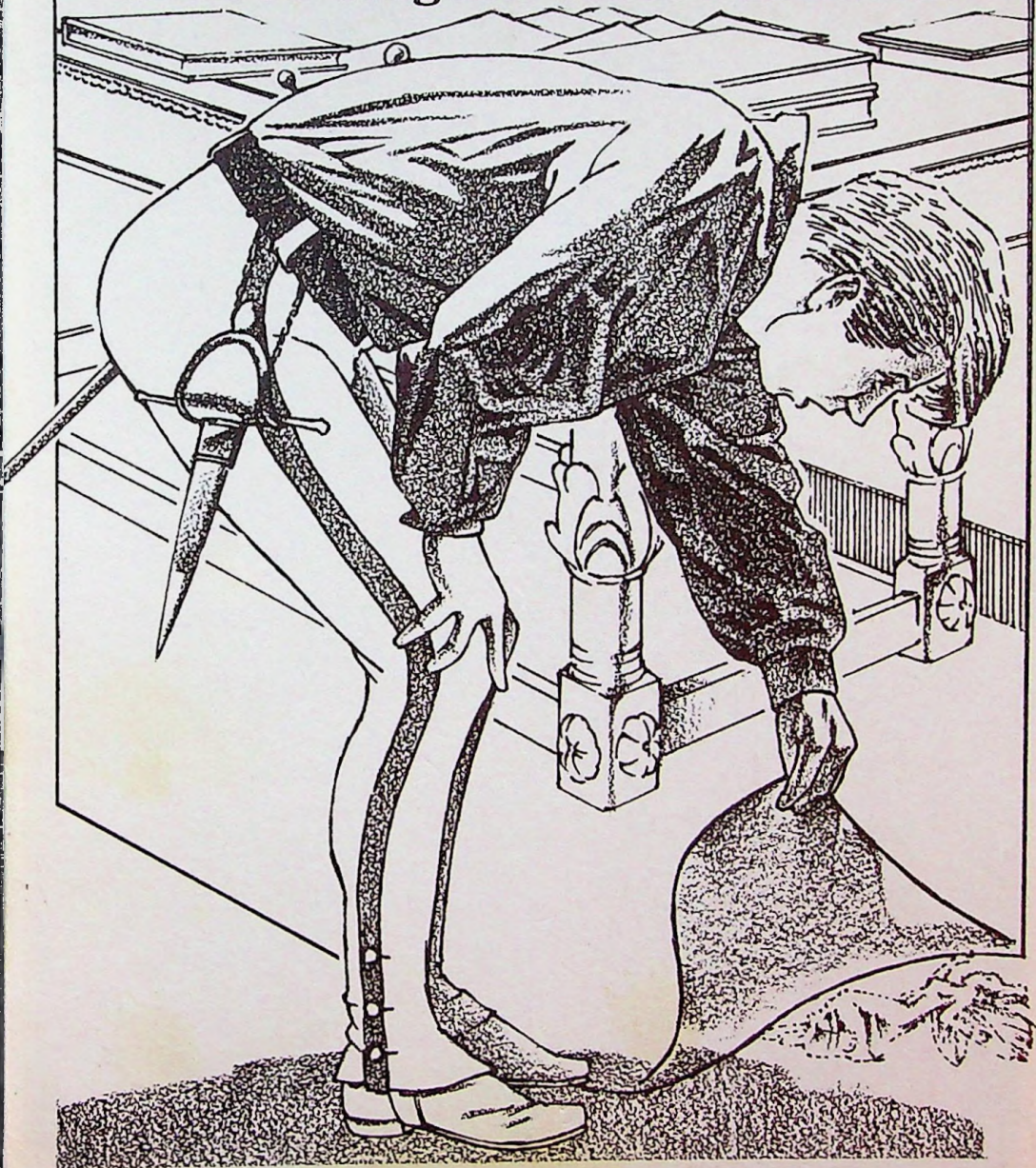


AMBERZINE

Issue #4 • August • 1993 • Ten Dollars





In grateful recognition
of their service to the
community of Amber
Diceless Role-Playing,

Randy McCall &
Don Woodward

are hereby awarded titles of

Game Master
In create

this 27th day of March, 1993

Can't wait until March for your
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In past years, the U•CON Gaming Convention has hosted Amber events gamemastered by Erick Wujcik, Randy McCall, Don Woodward, Cathy Klessig, John Schippers, and others. We held playtest Amber events before the rules were published, and we've had more and more Amber Diceless Roleplaying every year. We don't *just* do Amber — but we do Amber right.

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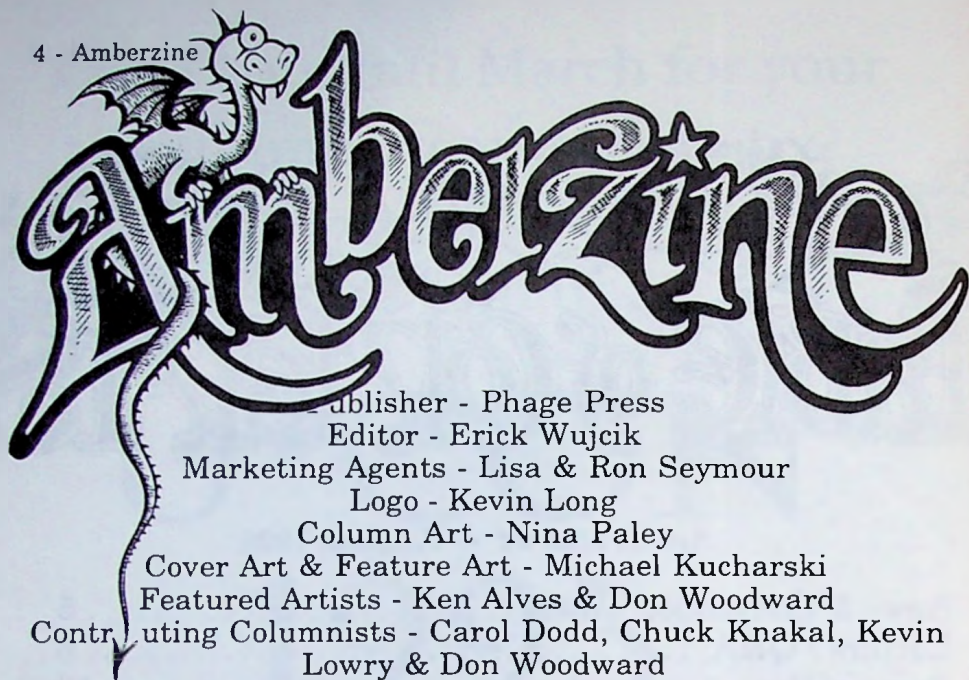
*U•CON is a production of the Wolverine
Gaming Club at the University of Michigan*



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Ambercon 1993 Awards

For the first time the titles of *Game Master Laureate* were conferred, at this year's packed **Ambercon** banquet. A capacity crowd was on hand to see Randy McCall and Don Woodward receive their gold-embossed plaques (see page 1), and engraved goblets.

With the exception of the very first play-test, Randy McCall (known as co-author of *Beyond the Supernatural*) was the very first GM to conduct an Amber Diceless campaign. Credit him with the first "Character Quiz," as well as coming up with the utterly innovative idea of basing his campaign centuries after Patternfall, with player characters coming from combative "houses" founded by the mythical and long-vanished elders.

Don Woodward ran the very first Amber tournament scenario, "Crystal Amber," and he's been running his beloved *d'Ambre Campaign* since 1987. In addition, his speculations on the cosmology of the Amber universe, as well as on the metaphysical basis of role-playing (well represented in his "It's Not a Game!" *Amberzine* column) have sparked innumerable debates in our little community.

Amber Diceless Nominated for 1991 Origins™ Award

Though a year late (ballots for 1991 and 1992 were released simultaneously), *Amber* was finally nominated for "Best Role-Playing Rules of 1991" by the Academy of Adventure Gaming Arts & Design, chaired by Mark Matthews-Simmons.

While the final awards election was open to the public, official ballots were due June 25th. As Phage Press didn't receive notice until May 26th, many fans were left out.

Other nominees included GDW's *Dark Conspiracies*, White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade*, TSR's *D&D Basic Rules* and TSR's *D&D Cyclopedia*.

ConFrancisco

September 2-6 1993
San Francisco, California

Bay area folks, even if you don't register for the convention, you might want to drop a line to Phage Press. Current plans are to run at least a dozen cross-overs and mini-campaigns, some at nearby hotels. GMs will include Erick Wujcik, Eric Snider, John Speck and others.

You can reach the ConFrancisco hotline at 510-945-1993.



Amber Q & A

Suppose a character who wishes to have great prowess/skill in all forms of unarmed combat, but does not want the actual physical power/strength which is linked to it... Or suppose someone who wishes to be supreme in armed combat, but has no desire whatsoever to lead troops, nor any interest in the study of tactics & strategy that relate to this... Finally, a character who has no knowledge of any weapons utilizing gunpowder and beyond, but is still the best blade of the realm... Is there a way within the Attribute system to allow for this? Granted, one could simply declare a

preference, but what about two or more scores for different parts of an Attribute? This could give more points to play with in the creation process...

Jonathan Riseling
Brooklyn, New York

Let me hit this in reverse order.

First off, during the first couple of years of play-testing I fooled around with various systems of Warfare "specialization." All of which were absolute disasters. Mostly because players let the stupid points get in the way of role-playing.

However, I think the reason why such systems don't work, the reason why they are all fundamentally flawed, lies in the definition of the

Amber universe.

*My college fencing instructor, **Maestro Istvan Danosi**, arguably America's finest fencing coach ever (he won something like a dozen NCAA coaching awards), told me that fencing was simply chess in motion. He saw all combat, whether it be fencing, fisticuffs, or flying squadrons, as a particular way of using the brain. As a martial arts instructor in the pre-Communist Hungarian Military Academy, he saw all conflict in the same way.*

Assume that is true.

Certainly it seems to reflect Zelazny's beliefs. He presents Benedict in exactly that light.

*Now let's draw that conclusion together with some of the underlying assumptions about **Amber**. If a player character were expert in any specialization, regardless of what it might be, what's to stop that character from hopping over to a fast-time Shadow, and figuring out how to apply their specialty to another aspect of Warfare?*

Nothing.

*So I decided that Warfare is really a measure of the character's potential. A way of puzzling out how well they think, and how well they coordinate mind and body (for a complete discussion, check out **The Mind's Sky** by Timothy Ferris, and the chapter called "Joe Montana's Premotor Cortex").*

None of which should stop anyone from role-playing the things you describe. If a character has never seen a gunpowder weapon, then they should role-play

the process of learning how to use one (I've done that myself, in character, and it's a lot of fun!)...

My players are a high Psyche lot. They like to use their mental powers to read people's thoughts, force them to obey commands, etc. For example, one character, floating in the ocean alone after a naval engagement, grabbed hold of a shark that tried to eat him, and forced it to bear him landward. Is there any way to prevent this, apart from just having them meet opponents with higher Psyche than they have?

Graeme M. Smith
Newark, New Jersey

Oh, I'd just love to Game Master your group for a few hours...

*As **Amberites** and generally god-like beings, I have no problem whatever with them lording it over mere Shadow dwellers. After all, what difference does it make if they Psychically dominate hundreds, or even millions?*

...though I might have made it a wee bit difficult to deal with a shark. Not because it has any kind of significant Psyche, but because a shark really doesn't have the mechanisms for communication. Which means the character would be constantly battling the shark's instincts, and controlling it only by feeding it "visions."

Anyway, the main question is really how to teach the player characters to "Just Say No" to casual mind play.

As a Game Master you need to

look at what some of the drawbacks might be to their habit. It's best to let them continue, just to figure out some interesting consequences.

For example, what if anyone they mind-touch becomes "imprinted" in some way. After all, exposure to such a powerful Psyche will be an overwhelming, very memorable experience. So the poor "victim" might assume the player character's identity. Or might start to preach about the "truth" that spoke into their mind.

Certainly the "leakage" from such an experience would provide an interesting source of information... I can just see it:

GM: "Yup, you're walking up to the Guardhouse, and you hear voices from within."

Player: "Voices? After my Psychic command those two guards shouldn't wake up for hours!"

GM: "That's true... So what are you doing?"

Player: "I'll sneak up and take a look inside."

GM: "Wow! You see Caine! He's looking right into the eyes of one of the guards. The other guard still seems unconscious, and there's a big guy with his back towards you. What are you doing?"

Player: "Caine? What is he doing?"

GM: "This is really weird, Caine is staring at the guard and the guard seems to be speaking strangely... in fact, the guard seems to be imitating *your* voice, your way of speaking. The guard says something about Wyverns... Say, aren't Wyverns the Guardians on your personal Shadow?"

Player: "What? What else is he saying?"

GM: "Well, I'm not sure you want to keep listening. The big guy is turning

toward you, and... hmmm... it seems to be Gérard! What are you doing?"

One last tip. Just consider what might happen if a player character comes across a command left by an earlier manipulation...

One of the players in my group has taken low Warfare and a lot of Bad Stuff. I've selected Dalt as the character's father, but I'm having trouble determining Dalt's Attributes and Powers. I've put him at a fairly high Warfare (somewhere between Julian and Corwin). He has Pattern Imprint, which means at least Amber level Endurance. I don't know what his Psyche or Strength should be. Can you help me out?

Chris Jarvis
Hixson, Tennessee

Doesn't it really depend on the role you have in mind for Dalt?

If Dalt is to be the player character's father, and (I assume) part of the character's Bad Stuff, his Attributes would depend on what role Dalt will play.

When Dalt is in a loving and close relationship, one where the character really cares about Dalt, then you likely should have Dalt hounded and persecuted by elder Amberites. Then it would be to the player character's ill-interest to have Dalt weak and in need of help.

Conversely, if the player character is to have a bad relationship with Dalt (since everybody seems to hate Dalt, wouldn't that be more of a Good Stuff

thing?), then it would be necessary to beef Dalt up with enough potential to continuously threaten the player character.

have a Chaos stat or two, and a small proportion would show up with the full Amber compliment...

Do you consider natives of Amber (outside the royal family) to have Amberite level attributes or human level?

Mark Bennett
 Brandenburg, Kentucky

If a character with Pattern can find anyone that they look for in Shadow, why were Corwin's brothers unable to find him when he was exiled?

Roger Frederick
 Reno, Nevada

Ah, a question that I can answer in a straightforward way!

The way I see things, the Game Master must determine what basic stock makes up the population of Amber. Yes, you could assume that all the natives have Amber Attributes, but that's not how I see it.

Instead, I think that City Amber was populated by Oberon, as he brought people back from Shadow. They were probably, as a group, above the average, in both Strength and Endurance. That basic breeding group has subsequently been subjected to the pressure of outside visitors, some that were more ordinary, but most would have the same kind of above-average qualities (because getting to Amber isn't ordinary).

Now comes the big Game Master decision. Just how lusty was Oberon (i.e., did it extend to serving maids and the like), and how fertile are his offspring? Given your answer, you can then draw the conclusion that Amber blood, in various measure, is scattered throughout the population. A significant number (maybe a third) would be dead Human, perhaps a majority might

If you read between the lines, I think you'll find that Corwin was found out in Shadow, perhaps by everyone who went looking for him.

First off, Eric, and then Flora, knew exactly where he was. Part of the reason for Flora's extended stay on Shadow Earth might have been simply to put off anyone who came looking for Corwin. It's even possible that she showed him off, describing him as an "uncanny Shadow of our brother."

Aside from interference from Eric and Flora, we know that Random was a frequent visitor, that Bleys, Brand and Fiona all knew of Corwin's location, and that it was pretty likely that Caine and Julian would have known as well.

*In fact, I could make the case that **every** Amberite knew Corwin's whereabouts...*



Series Pattern

by Chuck Knakal

Back to our basic assumptions. Keep the Amber three dimensional Pattern as still roughly spherical, but now there are two stems or corridors attached to the sphere instead of one. Picture them on opposite ends of the sphere. Each corridor could connect to another Pattern reality. The bigger reality can now be viewed as a series of beads on a string or atoms in a molecule. We now have a mental image to use on exiting the larger Amber Pattern and traveling to the next Pattern.

The GM should decide on the arrangement of the larger shape of Patterns and whether it has any significance. For example, is the bigger reality an infinitely long chain of spheres? Or does it have some shape? Some spheres can serve as junctions with more than two attaching corridors. Maybe the Pattern spheres are linked together like molecules in a large polymer

(or bobbles on a string)? Whatever you decide, at least you now have a mental map of a *big* universe.

As you decide to work elements from an adjacent sphere into your campaign, the beginnings of how it differs from the original can come about. Wouldn't it be in truly Amber fashion to have someone from Amber³ interfere with the operations of Amber², while making it look like as if he/she came from Amber¹? The players will have to figure out who these guys are, where they come from and what they are doing.

Here's a sample dialogue where Jane, who has Advanced Pattern, winds up going to another sphere:

GM: So, now you are at the start of the Pattern, what do you want to do?

Jane: I want to go to another Pattern, where life will be better.

GM: Think about some details of the place, but for now tell me how you are going to get there.

Jane: I want Pattern to take me as far away from my ungrateful relatives as possible. I want to journey to another place where my father is king and my new family will appreciate me. I want to be a princess and heir to the throne. I definitely don't want to go to an Amber shadow and live a falsehood.

GM: Okay. Are you going to walk the Pattern now?

Jane: Yes, I step on to it and I want to keep all of this in mind as I walk the Pattern.

GM: You feel the familiar energies

swell up around you as always, in fact the Pattern seems sympathetic to your cause. (Maybe it wants to get rid of you too?)

Jane: When I get to the center I want to just go, no goodbyes.

GM: You finally make it to the center and it sends you a long distance. Pattern is very weak here.

Jane: What is around me.

GM: Behind you is a featureless plain with a pale yellow sky, ahead is a mountain with a dark spot on it. To either side is the rolling turbulence of Chaos.

Jane: Is Pattern stronger behind me.

GM: Yes.

Jane: I want to walk towards the mountain.

GM: After an unknown length of time you arrive at a huge cave opening.

Jane: I am going to bring Pattern up.

GM: There isn't any Pattern energy around you. That was left behind hours ago.

Jane: Damn! Well maybe it's for the best. Does this place have anything?

GM: It has something, but it's not like any Pattern you've ever seen.

Jane: I'm not going to experiment now, I just want to enter the cave.

GM: Are you sure?

Jane: I am, I step though.

GM: As you pierce the shimmering barrier, you feel pulled into the cave and compelled to move along.

Jane: What barrier? Is it like a psychic compulsion?

GM: No, like a force or something pushing you along.

Jane: I hate to, but I look back.

GM: You see a yellow circle that is shrinking.

Jane: What is ahead?

GM: You don't see anything.

Jane: I relax and go with the flow.

GM: Okay. It's dark.

Jane: What is this flow?

GM: How are you checking it?

Jane: Does it have Pattern?

GM: As before, it has something.

Jane: Is it the same thing?

GM: You're not sure, it seems similar.

Jane: Does this feel like anything else I have ever experienced? (Good question)

GM: You don't think this is the first time you have experienced this. Additionally it seems to remind you of the flow of Pattern energy that swirls around you as you walk the Pattern. At least it feels similar to that.

Jane: Can I direct it?

GM: Towards what?

Jane: I don't know, so I'll just relax, trust Pattern, and let it take me to my new home.

GM: Some unknown time later you can dimly make out a red dot.

Jane: I'll watch it.

GM: It seems to stay the same size for a long time, then you notice it rapidly gets bigger.

Jane: I want to stop before I step through the barrier, assuming there is one like where I got into this.

GM: Oddly enough there is and you do stop. You are at a shim-

mering barrier.

Jane: What do I see.

GM: It's hard to make out, but you see a attractive red sky, another open plain, and what looks to be someone standing by a pair of horses.

Jane: Who is it?

GM: You can't tell. Are you going to step through and look?

Jane: I might as well.

GM: Okay. You see this imposing figure of a man. He looks at you with piercing eyes, then he smiles and holds out his hand. His deep voice says "Welcome home daughter."

Jane just experienced a trip through the conduit that connects to the next three dimensional Pattern and was whisked along to that place. The Game Master has given her some hints about a flow of energies that may be related to Pattern. Jane now has lots of room for future exploration.

What would this experience have been like if Jane's friend Janet had gone instead? Janet is an advanced trump mistress with a high psyche:

Janet: I can't stand the bickering, politicking and general bad karma around here. No one likes me. I just don't feel fulfilled here. (It sounds like Janet has a little bad stuff)

GM: We have talked about your discomfort before.

Janet: Well it's worse now. I still don't know who my parents are and everyone here is trying to use me.

GM: So what do you want to do?

Janet: You know how I have meditated and drawn trumps of places I have never been to before? Well, I want to draw a trump of the entryway that leads to my family. A home where I am loved and appreciated.

GM: Is that it?

Janet: Basically, but lets do it right. I believe my father would be king of that realm. I would be the missing princess and heir to the throne. All of this must be a real place, not some artificial shadow where I'll be manipulated by my "relatives" again.

GM: Okay, give me some details about the realm later, but for now lets move on.

Janet: I'll relax at my work table with my supplies at hand. I am focusing on my desires as we just discussed them.

GM: Okay, you wake up. The sun is setting on the horizon and you feel rested.

Janet: Did I do a trump card?

GM: There is one here and it seems to be in your trance style. It looks like a cave opening at a mountain. Chaos swirls on the right side and a yellow sky is on the left.

Janet: Does this place look familiar?

GM: You don't remember being there before.

Janet: I want to activate the card.

GM: Okay. It's not easy.

Janet: Does it seem like it's far away?

GM: Exactly.

Janet: I am pushing it, HARD.

GM: Okay, you manage to contact

this place. Are you going to step through?

Janet: Does it feel bad?

GM: No.

Janet: I step through.

GM: You rainbow shift your way (and it is a long way) to the cave opening. It feels like you have gone much farther than ever before. It was kind of tiring.

Janet: Do I feel anything from the cave?

GM: It seems to have some type of psychic power about it.

Janet: What does it look like in the cave?

GM: You really can't see into it. It is inky black.

Janet: I'll toss a stone in.

GM: Okay.

Janet: Well?

GM: You don't see it, nor did you hear it land.

Janet: I am going to carefully put one foot in and feel for the cave floor.

GM: There is a solid floor there. You also felt a faint response when you crossed over into the cave.

Janet: A response?

GM: Psychically.

Janet: Was it bad?

GM: No.

Janet: Well, I am going to trust my trumps and my skill. My cards have always taken me where I wanted to go. I step into the cave.

GM: Are you sure? This seems like a irreversible commitment.

Janet: No, I'm not sure, but I'm going anyway.

GM: Okay, when you fully step into the cave you feel cut off from where you were. You seem to be

in the presence of some type of extremely powerful psyche, that is slowly becoming more aware of you.

Janet: Does this psyche feel like it's attacking me?

GM: No, just looking.

Janet: Do I see anything?

GM: Looking around you see a shrinking yellow circle behind you.

Janet: Do I get any impressions?

GM: You feel like you are being put away.

Janet: Can I fight this thing?

GM: For a few seconds... Do you want to challenge it to a mental battle?

Janet: No, I am just going to focus on going to the home we have discussed.

GM: Anything else? Are you going to look around?

Janet: No!

GM: After a while you feel as if you have stopped.

Janet: If it feels safe, I will open my eyes and look around.

GM: It feels great. You feel a comforting arm circle your shoulders, and a deep voice says "Welcome home daughter".

In this scenario Janet got hints of a psychic force with some purpose. She knew the cave was a portal to where she wanted to go. Since Janet is Pattern insensitive, she completely missed out on the lack of Pattern, or flow of Pattern type of forces. The Game Master has the opportunity to tailor the game experience to each type of player, taking into account different Powers, Attributes and personality.

Burn the Innocent

by Jane M. Lindskold

In his early essay "Tomorrow Stuff," Roger Zelazny mentions certain recurring themes in his writing: "sometimes the impossible love which sustains, impossibly, the tortured soul, sometimes the hate so big that it would burn the innocent to reach the guilty." While Zelazny is clearly fascinated with both extremes, in the end, hate beats out love as a motivating force for the characters in his fiction.

In story after story, Zelazny portrays people striving to achieve some goal or to make some change and no matter how bright their beginning motivations may be, what finally powers them is their hatred. Nor is this a surprising focus for him to take, since even his academic interests, as reflected in his Master's Thesis *Two Traditions and Cyril Tourneur: An Examination of Morality and Humor Comedy Conventions in "The Revenger's Tragedy,"* show his abiding interest in the theme. (Zelazny's thesis is too long to discuss here, but, essentially, revenge tragedy deals with the schemes and plots of people who want to get even for something done to them—a very Amber interest). While this issue is important to the Amber novels, it is hardly the only place in his fiction that

Zelazny explores his fascination with hatred and its opposite.

In "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth," (1965) Carlton Davits' obsession with his failure to capture a gigantic Venusian sea beast nicknamed "Ikky" destroys his fortune and nearly himself. The novelette has frequently been compared to *Moby Dick*, but those who make that comparison miss a crucial element of the story—Davits' relationship with Jean Luharich, his ex-wife. In fact, most commentators focus on either the *Moby Dick* story or the romance plot, missing completely that what unites the two is the driving power of hate. When Davits had everything—love, money, power—he still could not capture Ikky. Only when he has lost all of his earthly treasure and sunk into a drunken hatred of himself for his cowardice after he had hooked Ikky can he achieve the impossible. Hatred allows him to overcome his paralyzing fear of Ikky and, ironically, memory of that hatred and the fear that it fed upon is what allows him to help Jean avoid the same trap that nearly destroyed him.

Twenty years later with the novelette "Permafrost," Zelazny returns to a plot set around fiercely competitive lovers. Here,

however, there is no reconciliation; hatred proves more powerful than love. In an inversion of the Christian ideal that God is love, hatred enables the former lovers to become ersatz gods of a frozen world.

"The Keys to December" (1966) is another story wherein Zelazny shows the weakness of love as a motivating force. The love that the Catforms Jarry and Sanza feel for each other is certainly a powerful thing. It enables them to raise the money to buy and terraform a world where they may live together, a daunting task, especially considering the isolated habitats in which they are forced to live because of the genetic engineering that has changed them from humans into Coldworld Catforms. Although love conquers numerous obstacles, it cannot conquer death. Jarry's desire to create a new world for the Catforms weakens after Sanza's death, since he will no longer to share the new world with his beloved. Instead of nobly working to further the lives of the 28,564 other Catforms (who presumably desire their world just as he and Sanza did) Jarry chooses to slow the process to allow the native Redforms a chance to evolve. His motivation is not noble altruism, but rather the selfish desire to continue in the Redform's memory as their beneficent god. Love, apparently, is only so powerful. In its absence, self-interest wins out.

In the novel *Lord of Light*, Zelazny again investigates the narrow border between love and hatred as a motivating force. Sam is certainly a noble fellow. He is willing to give up immortality, luxury, and even deification to promote the cause of those who are either not of the First or their chosen. However, his passion does not grow from love of his fellow humans; rather he is motivated by hatred. In a rather ironic exchange with Yama, Sam discovers that he has more in common with the Deicrats he defies than he imagines:

"When I have died the real death," said Sam, "then will I be changed. But until that moment I will hate Heaven with every breath that I draw. If Brahma has me burnt, I will spit into the flames. If he has me strangled, I will attempt to bite the executioner's hand. If my throat is cut, may my blood rust the blade that does it. Is that a ruling passion?"

"You are good god material," said Yama.

In the 1992 novella "Come Back to the Killing Ground, Alice, My Love," Zelazny returns to familiar ground with a new sophistication. Unlike his earlier works where the lines between love and hatred are more clearly drawn, in "Alice" Zelazny deals with characters who all believe that they are acting from the nobility of love rather than the distorting force of hate. Scarred Alice believes that she loves Nelsor and

because of that love she has sacrificed her sister clones in an attempt to free him. Yet, as the story progresses, she is forced by Kallifriki and Nelsor to face that her hatred of being a clone is what truly drives her. Nelsor is simply a symbol of everything—most particularly of love—that she cannot have.

Yet, if Nelsor provides the means for Scarred Alice to recognize her own hatred, in the process he says enough to make the reader doubt his own love of the original Alice. First, he confirms the Alice clone's story that he could not tell his wife from her clone. Then, he admits that he tortured other of the clones in an effort to find out which was responsible for the original Alice's death. Although they are "only" clones, one does wonder about the depth of a love that allows the lover to mutilate and torture a perfect image of the beloved. Nelsor claims that his nervous breakdown was due to the trauma this torture entailed, but one wonders about the validity of the statement, especially in light of Aidon's creation of a killing ground for the clones as a "healing ritual" for his master.

Oddly, the only character in the story who may display love in the classic sense of desiring another's well-being more than one's own is the computer, Aidon. Aidon's perverse killing ground is not created out of hatred, as might superficially seem to be the case, but from

love for Nelsor and a sincere desire that he recover. Perhaps his inhumanity allows Aidon to love without being aware of the pain and suffering that his love creates.

When applied to the Amber novels, Zelazny's fascination with love and hate becomes a sub-text for the novels and may explain the great difference in tone between the stories that Corwin narrates and those that Merlin narrates.

The early Amber novels begin, like many of the Zelazny stories already discussed, with a character acting from what he wishes to believe are, if not the noblest of motives, at least better motives than those of his rivals. Corwin of Amber is not even completely recovered from his amnesia before he decides that he is going to "try" for the throne which his father's disappearance has left vacant. Two wars, several murders, a blinding, and assorted other maimings later, Corwin realizes that he didn't want the throne after all:

Hatred drove me at first—hatred for my brother Eric—and my desire for the throne. Had you asked me on my return which was the stronger, I would have said that it was the summons of the throne. Now, though... now I would have to admit that it was actually the other way around. (*Chronicles II* 194)

Corwin's growth within the novel centers around his realization that what had driven him was not the love he believed he felt for his home or the desire to rule it wisely, but hatred and envy of his brother and perhaps of his father as well.

Corwin is not the only of the characters from the first five novels to act from a desire for hatred and revenge rather than from nobler emotions. While self-interest certainly is the strongest motivating factor for any of the Princes and Princesses, they often choose what side they will act with based on who they dislike least.

Random allies himself with Corwin because of his dislike for Eric rather than from a belief that Corwin's cause is right. As he tells Corwin: "Of all my relations, I like sex the best and Eric the least" (*Chronicles* I 36). In *Sign of the Unicorn* when Corwin interrogates Flora about her role as his guardian in Shadow, not even her desire to stay on his good side can make her hide her dislike for Random. Her comment is blunt: "It is too late to start pretending

I like him" (*Chronicles* II 46).

Later in the same novel, Corwin calls a meeting of his siblings in the Castle Amber library. Most of the Princes and Princesses choose to Trump in rather than simply using the door. Thus, their entrances become an elaborate expression of who they like and who they dislike. While this may seem a rather tepid way of expressing hatred, recall that none of these ancient conspirators would be so obvious as to make themselves vulnerable by admitting a hatred unless they were in a position to act upon it. Even so, when Corwin requests that they swear a pact to enforce exile on Brand's attacker if he or she will confess, Julian withholds his consent rather than give up his plans for revenge against whomever has slain

"Sometimes
the impossible
love which
sustains,
impossibly,
the tortured
soul,
sometimes
the hate so big
that it would
burn the
innocent
to reach the
guilty."

-Roger Zelazny

Caine. Only when he is certain that he can have his revenge does he agree to take oath with the others.

Hatred is not reserved as a motivating force for those of Amber. Two of the most powerful of the lesser players, Moire and Dara, make their most

significant actions motivated by hatred. Moire cannot forgive Random for his role in the death of her daughter, Morganthë. Although she is far too wise a ruler to risk war with Amber by executing one of the Princes, she does exact a strict penalty for his actions by making him stay in her realm for a year and marry Vialle, a member of her court. Ironically, from Moire's penalty comes one of the few examples of the other side of Zelazny's fascination, "the impossible love which sustains, impossibly, the tortured soul." Vialle grows to love Random during her year with him and she requests to join him when he is imprisoned in Amber for attempting to murder Eric. In *The Courts of Chaos* the Unicorn selects Random, despite his rascally disposition and comparatively minimal military prowess, over his more obviously gifted brothers as the new ruler of Amber. Certainly, the unicorn who looks upon her children with "pity and a strong love... and perhaps a touch of humor" (*Chronicles* II 423) would appreciate that in accepting Vialle's love and learning to love in return Random has trained most fittingly of all the Princes for the role of King.

Things do not go as well with the other arranged romance that plays a large role in the first five Amber novels. Dara was bred by Chaos from Benedict, one of the most promising

claimants to the throne, to bear a child by Corwin, the other most promising claimant. Both her kinfolk in Chaos and Oberon wish for her and Corwin to marry, but, although he is smitten with her, she never seems able to love him in return. At the Patternfall battle she uses the comparatively flimsy excuse that Corwin has ignobly slain her countryman Borel to break-off whatever relationship that they might have had. That Corwin still has feelings for her is clear, but he is also able to accept that her hatred has transformed her into something he does not recognize as the girl he had loved: "I could think only of what I had seen when she had gestured. The cowling had slipped away and I had gotten a glimpse of what she had become. It had not been a human face, there within the shadows. But I turned my head and watched until she was gone" (*Chronicles* II 417). Later, in Merlin's stories, Dara's hatred for Corwin becomes quite clear and alienates her from her son as well as from Corwin.

While Corwin is motivated, at least initially, by hatred and a desire for revenge, Merlin is definitely not. Yet, this is not because he lacks either the capacity or the training for these traditional activities of the Courts of Amber and Chaos. In *The Courts of Chaos* Merlin tells Corwin that his education included "the usual things a gentleman should know—magic, wea

pons, poisons, riding, dancing" and that "I was taught to dislike many of the things about Amber" (*Chronicles* II 420).

However, if he is not a master of hatred, Merlin does not share Vialle's deep capacity for love either. Instead, when the *Trumps of Doom* begins his story, Merlin is primarily motivated by curiosity and an innocent desire to please both his new-found relatives in Amber and those who raised him in Chaos. This tendency makes him easily manipulated, not just by Dara and Mandor (who have apparently been manipulating him since his birth), but by strong-willed friends like Luke (Rinaldo, Son of Brand) Reynard.

Luke fits the "classic" mold of a Prince of Amber much more accurately than Merlin does. In large part, this is due to his ability to use revenge and hatred as the motivating factors behind his actions. Although Luke is much happier as a traveling salesman, artist, and track runner, his mother, Jasra, has fostered in him a hatred of

Amber and most particularly of those members of Amber who were responsible for Brand's death. His friendship with Dalt, who has also been taught to hate Amber from his birth, reinforces his tendency towards hatred and revenge. Thus, Luke

is able to stage annual assassination attempts on Merlin, who otherwise is one of his closest friends. Later, he imprisons Merlin, attempts to steal the Ghost-wheel, stages the assassination of Caine, and otherwise seems well on the way to behaving in the fashion a young scion of Oberon should. What turns him from this path is his growing dislike of being manipulated by Jasra and his affection for Merlin, oddly similar forces to those that forced Corwin to reevaluate his own life and goals.

Lesser players in Merlin's stories,

like Julia and Jurt, also enter the game because of their hatred, in this case focused on Merlin personally, not on him merely as a representative of Amber. In both cases, although they give Merlin some difficulty,

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him...

they find that they are not up to the competition—at least not on the cosmic scale that those of Amber and Chaos play. Yet this awareness is not what makes them lessen their antagonism towards Merlin. What does change them is their growing respect, affection, and even love for each other—and perhaps an understanding that Merlin was not what they wanted to destroy after all.

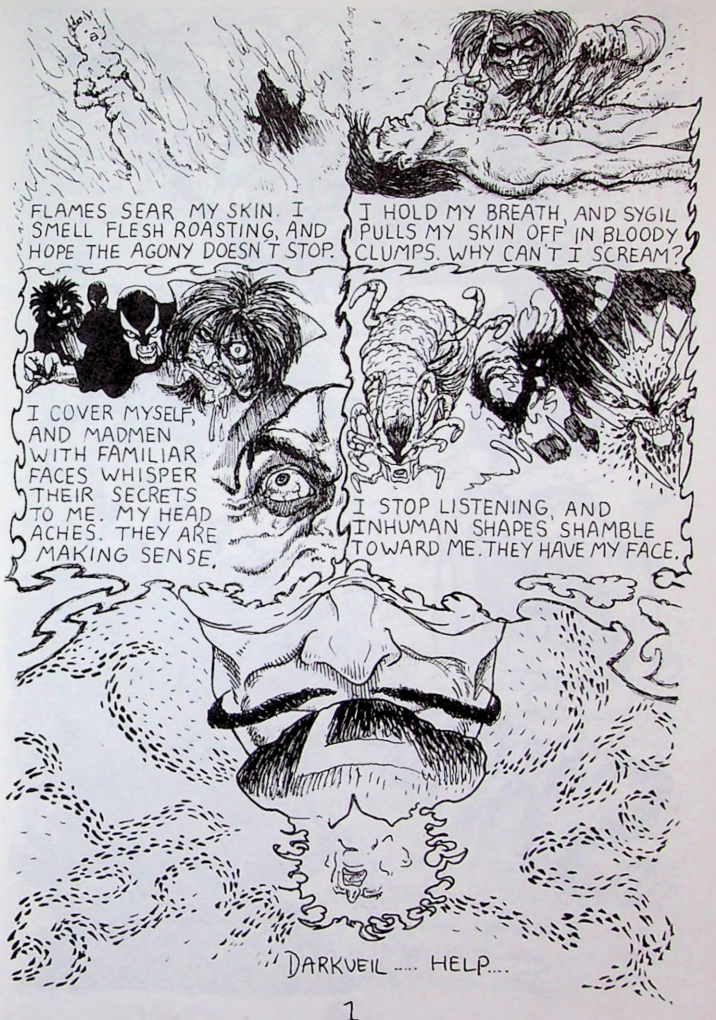
As in the first five Amber books, Merlin's stories also include a character who is motivated by love rather than by hatred. In this case, the character is not even human, but is the artificial intelligence, Ghostwheel. In Ghostwheel's first appearances, he is a rather frightening figure, a disembodied voice with the power to command the elements. However, as he develops in self-awareness, he acquires affection and even love for Merlin. Merlin, for all his failing in other areas, is wiser than Dr. Frankenstein and does not reject his "offspring" when it comes to him for advice. Gradually, a relationship grows between them, with Ghostwheel referring to Merlin as "Dad" and trying to fit himself into the Amber family tree. When Merlin goes to his final confrontation with Dara and Mandor, Ghostwheel is the ally who stands with him and makes certain that he can win.

Clearly, Zelazny's fascination with "hatred and its

opposite" has lead him into some strange and convoluted stories. If the road he has chosen is often dark, the end results are so captivating that for thirty years readers have been following him into stories that become more compelling as the reader questions just how far apart are love and hate. For the Amber novels, the paradox is more complex because of the length at which the scenarios are played out. Corwin must learn to love and forgive; Merlin must learn to be strong without falling into the blinding trap of hatred and revenge. Both journeys hold their fascinations but, perhaps in honest assessment, one can see that Merlin's journey may be the more difficult because hatred and revenge, especially with the compelling power that Zelazny portrays them, are so very attractive.

Next time around, **Dr. Jane M. Lindskold, PhD.**, will join Roger Zelazny and Carl Yoke in evaluating Kuttner's *The Dark World*. Her new book, *Roger Zelazny*, a critical/literary biography, will be out from Twayne this November.

Jane is also coordinating a bunch of Amber stuff for **Kaleidoscope**, September 24-26 1993, in her hometown of Lynchburg, Virginia. It's the only 1993 con to feature *both* Roger Zelazny and Erick Wujcik.



FLAMES SEAR MY SKIN. I
SMELL FLESH ROASTING, AND
HOPE THE AGONY DOESN'T STOP.

I HOLD MY BREATH, AND SYGIL
PULLS MY SKIN OFF IN BLOODY
CLUMPS. WHY CAN'T I SCREAM?

I COVER MYSELF,
AND MADMEN
WITH FAMILIAR
FACES WHISPER
THEIR SECRETS
TO ME. MY HEAD
ACHES. THEY ARE
MAKING SENSE.

I STOP LISTENING, AND
INHUMAN SHAPES SHAMBLE
TOWARD ME. THEY HAVE MY FACE.

DARKVEIL HELP....



K93

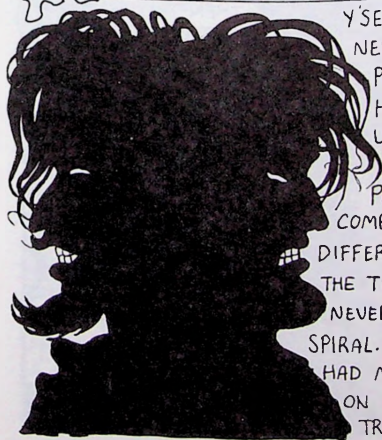


SOON. HE'LL
HAVE ABSORBED
ENOUGH. BURNING
WITH ALL THAT
ENERGY AND
THEN

.... YOU'LL
KILL HIM.

OF COURSE.

THAT WAS
THE PLAN
FROM THE
START.



Y'SEE, SWEETS, MORGAN THERE
NEVER REALIZED HOW MUCH
POWER HE WAS SITTING ON
HERE. IT'S A UNIQUE FORCE,
UNLIKE ITS COUNTERPARTS IN
AMBER OR CHAOS. HERE, THE
PATTERN AND LOGRUSS HAVE
COMBINED INTO SOMETHING FAR
DIFFERENT, MAYBE STRONGER THAN
THE TWO LONE PARTS. CORWIN
NEVER TOOK FULL CONTROL OF THE
SPIRAL. THAT'S PROBABLY WHY HE
HAD MORGAN. HE DIDN'T COUNT
ON MY "BIRTH" ON MORGAN'S
TRIAL RUN, HOWEVER. HA!



NOW HE'S LAYING
THERE, ABSORBING ALL THE
FULL POWER, EMOTIONS AND
CONFLICTS OF EMRACING BOTH
PATTERN AND LOGRUSS.

AND JUST BEFORE
HE GAINS FULL
POTENCY, I OFF
HIM AND ADD
THAT POWER TO
MINE, BECOMING
EVEN STRONGER!
DAMN, I'M GOOD.



SO YOU MUST
KILL HIM IN
ORDER TO BECOME
MORE POWERFUL?

YEP. WHEN BOTH OF US
REACH OUR FULL APEX,
WE WOULDN'T BE ABLE
TO EXSIST SIMULTANEOUS
LY ANYWAY. THE
CONTRADICTION OF TWO
"MORGANS" EXSISTING WITH
POWERS OF OPPOSITE
DESIGN WOULD RIP THIS
UNIVERSE APART.

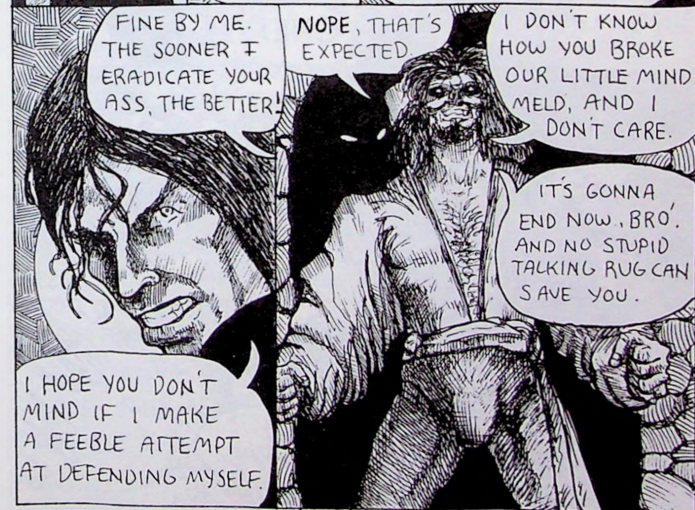
THEN THIS UNIVERSE
MAY HAVE A PROBLEM.

WHY?

MORGAN'S GONE.

WHAT?!!

DAMN
THAT BLANKET!



RIGHT.

(ONE SPELL AND YOU'RE...
..... ?!

SOMETHING AMISS?

WHAT DID
YOU...??

I'VE EVENED
THE ODDS.

BIG DEAL. SO WE DO IT WITH
NO POWERS. YOU'RE STILL REAL
EXHAUSTED FROM THE PSYCHIC
BEATING YOU'VE TAKEN. NO CONTEST!

TRUE. GUESS IT'S TIME FOR
ME TO FALL BACK ON THAT
OLD LESSON

KARL
TAUGHT
ME...

...WHEN IN DOUBT...

CHEAT!

ARRGH!!

YOU'RE
DEAD,
"BROTHER."

NOT ON AH6 ... YOUR ... ASS!

DAMN!
HE'S FADING!



THE SPIRAL ROOM! QUICK!



SHIT...
THAT WAS
COUGH!
CLOSE..



YOU'RE HURT! MY, YOU'RE ... OBSERVANT.
MORGAN SUCKERED ME..

I.. DIDN'T KNOW HE HAD IT IN
HIM THINGS ARE... SLIGHTLY
AWRY... I SUGGEST YOU... BEAT
FEET OUT OF.. HERE ... I'M GONNA..
OFF THE... COUGH! POWER..



WITH A LITTLE
HELP FROM SOME
BODILY FLUIDS.



SYGIL... I..

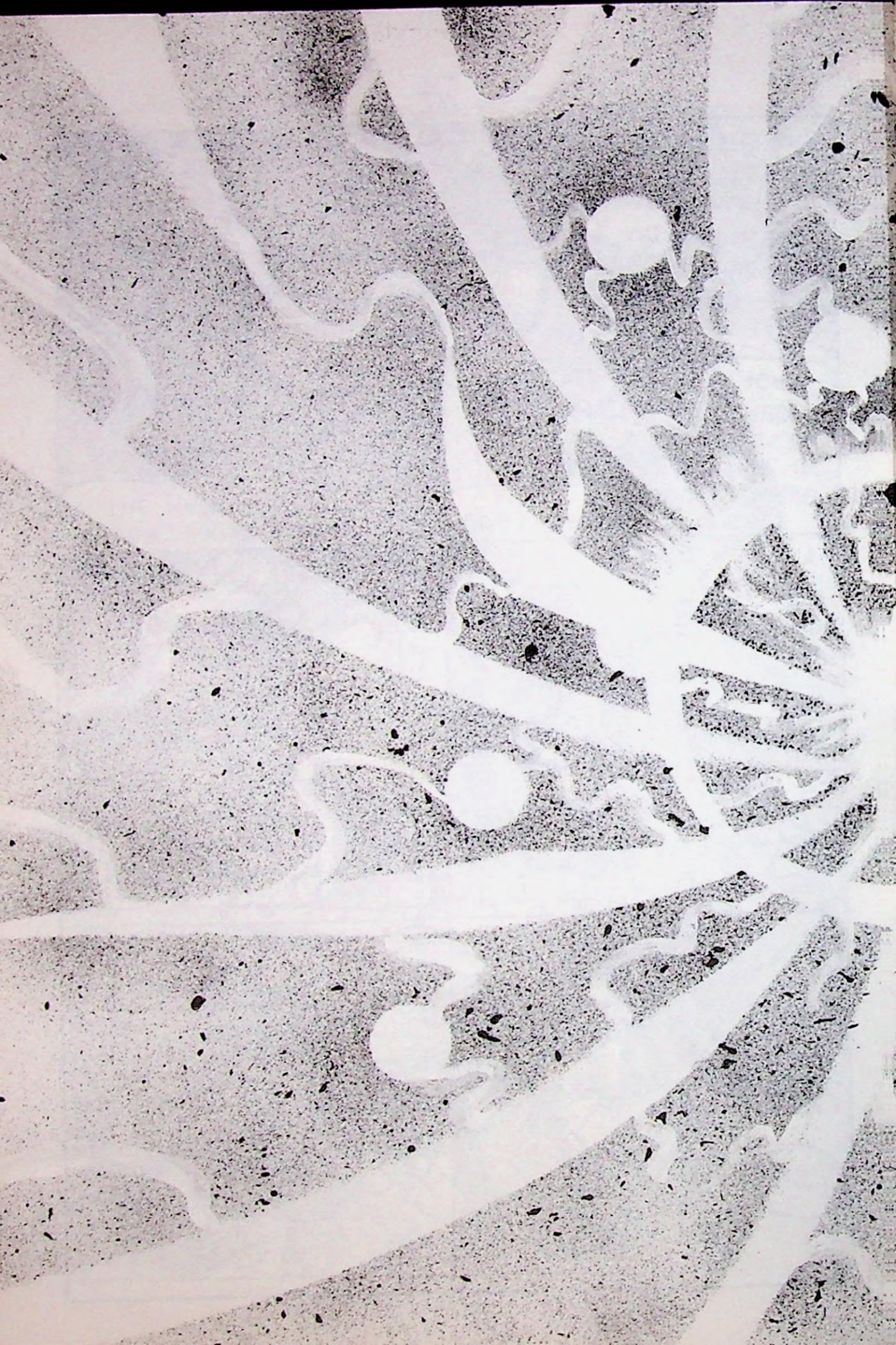
LOOK, I WOULD'VE
LEFT YOU IN SIX
MONTHS ANYWAY.
SAYONORA, SWEETNESS



SYGIL!

TOO LATE,
"BROTHER!"
IF I CAN'T
HAVE THIS
POWER....







ELSEWHERE...



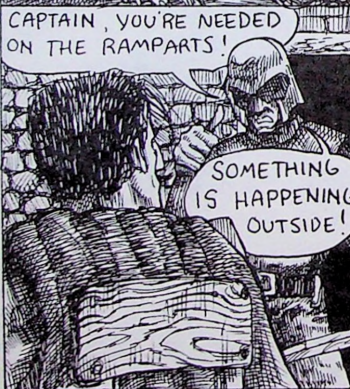
SHIT!



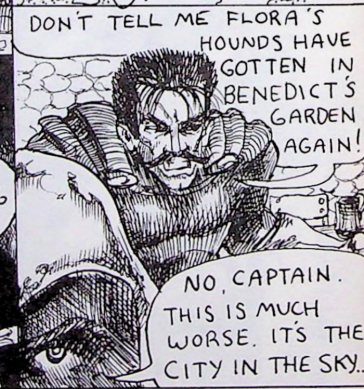
CAPTAIN, YOU'RE NEEDED
ON THE RAMPARTS!



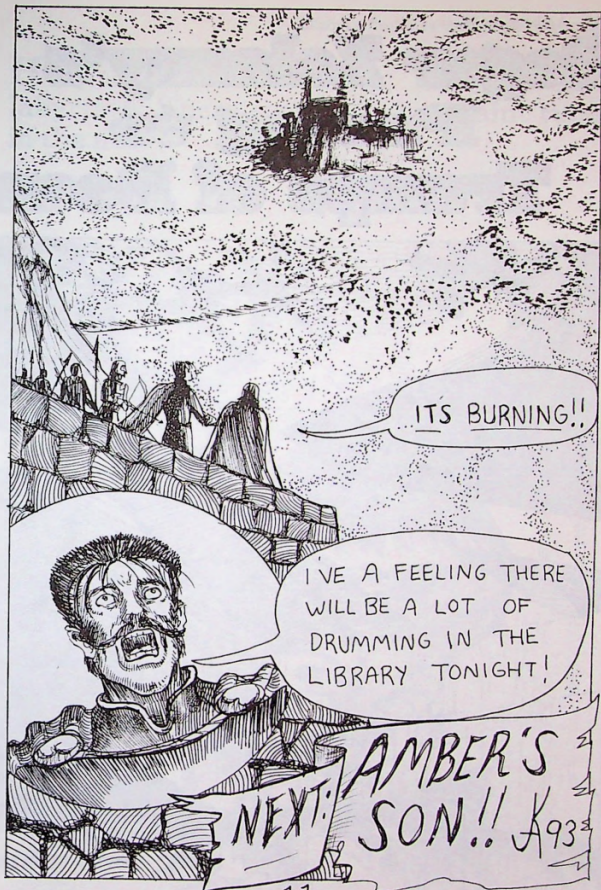
DON'T TELL ME FLORA'S
HOUNDS HAVE
GOTTEN IN
BENEDICT'S
GARDEN
AGAIN!



SOMETHING
IS HAPPENING
OUTSIDE!



NO, CAPTAIN.
THIS IS MUCH
WORSE. IT'S THE
CITY IN THE SKY...



ITS BURNING!!

I'VE A FEELING THERE
WILL BE A LOT OF
DRUMMING IN THE
LIBRARY TONIGHT!

NEXT: AMBER'S
SON!! K93

Roger Zelazny's Prolog to Trumps of Doom



He started out walking, into the dim labyrinth. There seemed to be a faint tune in the air...



It was almost too easy. A turning, a twisting, a doubling back...

And then he faced a rough, slanted wall, looked up and saw the shaft. He commenced climbing.

It was no longer easy. A swaying sensation began—faint, then distinct—as if he were mounting into the uppermost branches of a tall tree. His way brightened and then dimmed, repeatedly, in no perceptible pattern. After a time, his eyes ached. Images doubled, wavered...

When the way grew suddenly level he doubted his vision, till his extended hand assured him that there was indeed a choice of passages.

He leaned and moved his head into each of these. The faint musical sound seemed slightly louder in the one to the left, and he followed it. Of that, at least, he was certain.

Now his way rose and fell. He climbed up, he climbed down. The brightening and dimming continued, only now the brightness was brighter and the dimness dimmer.

And the sensations of external movement had not abated. The floor of the tunnel seemed to ripple beneath his feet, the walls and roof to contract and expand. He stumbled, caught himself. Stumbled again...

At the next turning the sounds grew slightly louder, and he realized that they were not a tune, but rather a totally random concatenation of noises.

He climbed. He descended. The passageway shrank, and finally he crawled.

The sensations of movement increased. At times he seemed to be spinning; other times, it felt as if he were falling into an enormous abyss.

The flashes of light now drove nails of pain into his skull. He began to hallucinate. Faces and figures. Flames. Or were they hallucinations?

He felt the first faint pulsation upon his left wrist...

How long had he been moving? His clothes were already in tatters and he bled, painlessly, from a dozen scrapes and lacerations.

He descended a well and emerged somehow upward onto a floor. Mad laughter rang about him, ceasing only when he realized it to be his own.

The sounds grew even louder, until it felt as if he negotiated a gallery of demonic bells—wild, out of phage, their vibrations beating against him.

Thinking became painful. He knew that he must not stop, that he must not turn back, that he must not take any of the lesser turnings where the sounds came softer. Any of these courses would prove

fatal. He reduced this to one imperative: Continue.

Again, a pulsing at his wrist, and a faint, slow movement...

He gritted his teeth when he saw that he must climb once more, for her limbs had grown heavy. Each movement seemed as if it were performed underwater—slowly, requiring more than normal effort.

A screen of smoke offered frightening resistance. He drove himself against it for an age before he passed through and felt his movements become easy once again. Six times this occurred, and each time the pressure against him was greater.

When he crawled out, drooling and dripping blood, on the other side of the chamber from which he had entered, his eyes darted wildly and could not fix upon the small, dark figure which stood before him.

"You are a fool," it told him.

It took some time for the words to register, and when they did he lacked the strength with which to reply.

"A lucky fool," it went on, darkness flowing about it like wings. (Or were they really wings?) "I had not judged you ready to essay the Logrus for a long while yet."

He closed his eyes against this speaker, and an image of the route he had followed danced within his mind's seeing, like a bright, torn web folding in a breeze.

"...And a fool not to have borne a blade and so enchanted it... or a mirror, a chalice, or a wand to brace your magic. No, all I see is a piece of rope. You should have waited, for more instruction, for greater strength. What say you?"

He raised himself from the floor, and a mad light danced within his eyes.

"It was time," he said. "I was ready."

"And a cord! What a half-ass—Uck!"

The cord, glowing now, tightened about his throat.

When the other released it, the dark one coughed and nodded.

"Perhaps—you knew—what you were doing—on that count..." it muttered. "Is it really time? You will be leaving?"

"Yes."

A dark cloak fell upon his shoulders. He heard the splash of water within a flask.

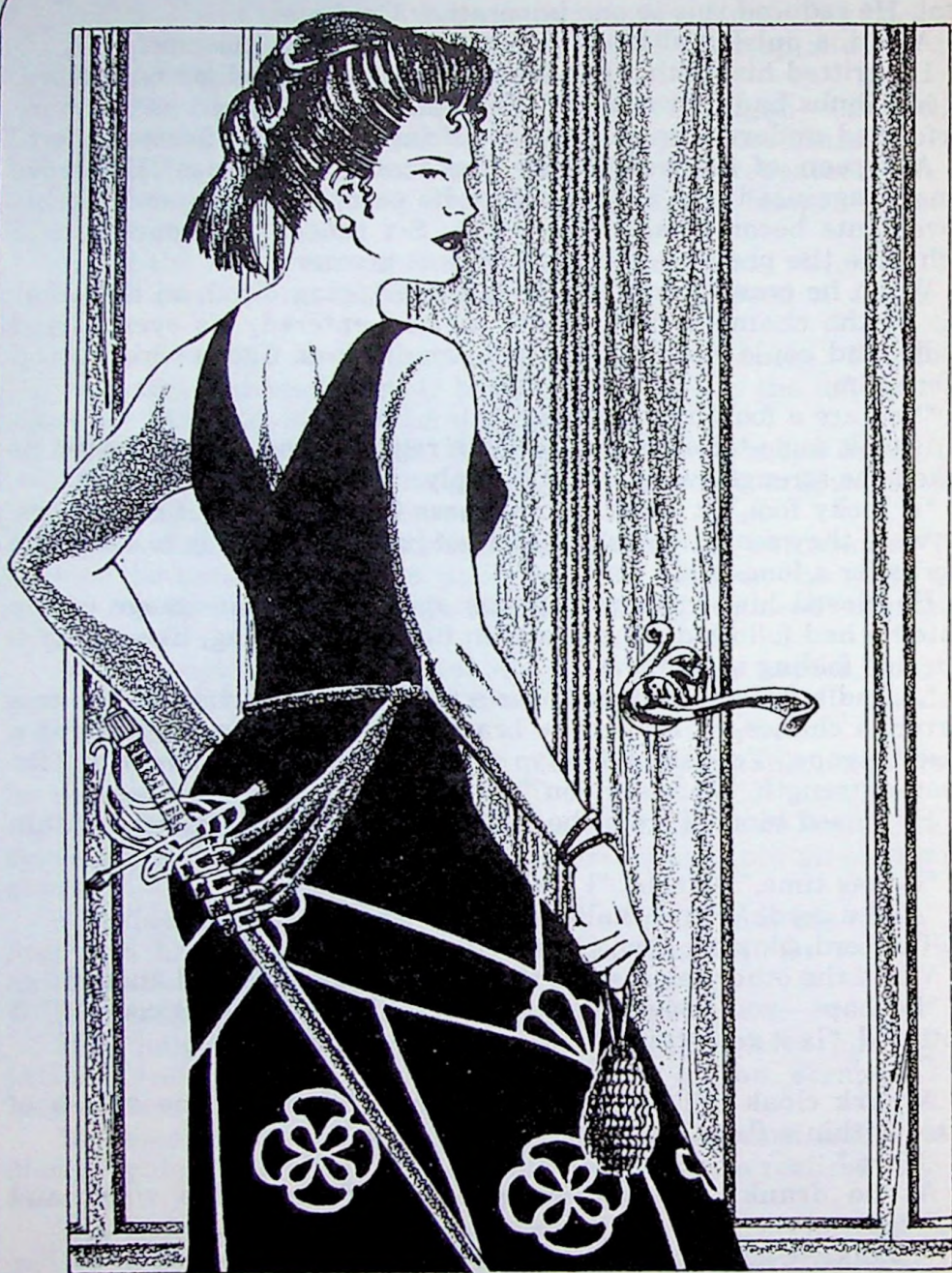
"Here."

As he drank, the cord wrapped itself about his wrist and vanished.

"Thanks, Uncle," he said, after several swallows.

The dark figure shook its head.

"Impulsive," it said. "Just like your father."



I looked at **Eleanor** sideways, hoping she wouldn't notice that I was... well, scared... We shared a weak grin...

BRONWYN'S TALE - PART II

By Carol Dodd

(An Amber Log, Based on a Scenario by Erick Wujcik)

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I woke up feeling much better than I had any right to feel. Eyes slitted against the insistent sunlight, I cautiously tested each muscle for the aches and pains that just *had* to be the result of my recent exertions. No aches, no pains. Then I took a big chance and opened my eyes fully, ready to shut them again as soon as the headache took hold. No headache. Hmmmm... Maybe I was going to survive this, after all...

Throwing all caution to the wind, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and sat up. No wave of dizziness assaulted me. Better and better!

I did notice one disconcerting fact. Under the pile of quilts and blankets, I was naked. What nerve! Who could have put me to bed? Certainly not my maid. She is as familiar with my collection of cotton granny nightgowns as I am. My robe was nowhere in sight. I dove back beneath the covers and reached for the bell-pull.

Annalise answered so quickly I was sure she had been lurking in the antechamber waiting for the call. She had the customary tray with a pot of the herb tea that I use as a stimulant in the morning in her hands. I didn't feel like herb tea, this morning. Actually, I was in the mood for chocolate, but conflicting orders tend to confuse servants so I accepted the tea, watching her face, which was watching me back with a look that I couldn't define...

"Miss Bronwyn," she murmured, "it's so good to see you up and about. How are you feeling?"

"Fine." I shrugged. She looked as if she doubted this, which didn't surprise me. Strenuous exertion usually does me in, big time.

"I guess I must have slept all afternoon and through the night as well."

"All night and..." She looked astounded. "Ma'am, you've been asleep for two days! We were beginning to wonder..." She trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

I decided to ignore her reaction, sipping my tea and enjoying my feeling of well-being. Most likely, my father had been pressuring her to wake me and she had resisted, as usual. I appreciated Annalise. She does a lot for me, but then, that's what I pay her to do.

Under other circumstances, I would have stayed there all morning, enjoying the sunlight and the fact that I was feeling so well. I'm lazy as a rule, and breakfast in bed is right up my alley. Today, though, I was eager to get up and around and see what had transpired while I was sleeping.

Things were still pretty topsy-turvy when I had passed out in the Grove. There were a lot of loose ends I wanted to tie up and a lot of people I wanted to catch up with, provided they had all survived. I hoped so. Most of them had begun to grow on me, in a weird sort of way.

Annalise was moving about the room, tidying up and chattering rather nervously. Poor thing, I thought, she's been concerned about me. I felt a little guilty for giving her such a scare. Honestly, I don't know what I do to evoke such loyalty.

"I'm getting up," I told her. "Could you find my robe and start the shower, please?"

She handed me the robe without comment and went into the bathroom. I belted the worn chenille sash around my waist and pulled it tight, astounded as the fabric parted and snapped in my hands. I stared at it stupidly for a few moments. Then I giggled. I was really going to have to break down and spring for some new clothes. Everything I owned had a real bad case of shabby. But the old, worn things are so comfortable, I hate to give them up. Oh well...

I strode past Annalise, who was mumbling disjointedly about trying to find me something to wear. I guessed she had noticed my robe and made the obvious conclusions. I hung the robe on the back of the door and stepped into the shower. It wasn't hot enough.

Usually, I like my showers lukewarm and soothing. Today I turned the faucet handle all the way to the right and reveled in the sudden course of heat and steam. The water coursed over me, violent and invigorating. I let it pound over my back and shoulders, stretching and turning and breathing in the steamy mist.

I stepped out at last, groping for a towel, wrapped up my hair and threw the robe back on, unbelted, heading for my dressing table. I sat down, still dripping slightly, and fished in my jewelry box for earrings and my bracelets. The bracelets felt tight somehow. Maybe I had sprained my wrists slightly, battling Brand and his cohort. Must be some residual swelling...

I yanked the towel from my head and picked up my comb, glancing for the first time in the mirror above the dressing table. The comb froze in midair as I stared in disbelief at my own reflection.

My own face looked back at me, but that's where the similarity ended. It was perched above broad shoulders and a strongly corded neck. I glanced again at my wrists and realized that what I had mistaken for swelling was actually a thickening and broadening of the muscles in my forearms. I ripped open the robe, staring in horror at the flat, striated belly and thighs that rippled with muscle as I tensed. Every hair on my head tried to stand straight on end!

And that wasn't the worst of it. As I jumped from the chair, I realized that I couldn't see the top of my head in the mirror anymore. I was at least three inches taller than I was supposed to be.

My strangled cry of shock brought Annalise running, staring and

wringing her hands in her apron in helpless furor. I realized then why she had been acting so strangely.

"Miss Bronwyn," she began, but I cut her off with a gesture and she flinched out of the way. Her eyes told me she was afraid. So was I.

Frantically, I searched for the one thing that should have occurred to me the moment I woke up. It hadn't, and as I groped for any vestige of the Pattern in my mind, I realized with a pang that I hadn't even noticed its absence until I actually stopped to look. Something was drastically wrong!

With an inarticulate cry of rage and horror, I wheeled and darted for the door. She scuttled out of my way, calling something I didn't pause to understand. I ran down the hall, banked at the stairs, taking them two at a time, not bothering to steady my flight with the rail. My foot slipped once, still dripping from the shower, but I caught myself in a weird shift of balance, out of instinct or desperation or I don't know what. I didn't want to know.

The only thing I cared about was getting to the Pattern room as fast as I could. It was the only thing I could think of that might possibly make things all right with me again. Make me myself again.

I lowered my head and ran.

I rounded the bend by the Grand Staircase, someone's shouts ringing in my ears. I ignored it. No one got in my way. I raced along the passage past the library and the throne room, heading for the back staircase that leads to the nether regions of the castle. A few white faces peered from doorways along the way, but no one ventured into the corridor.

I reached the back staircase, catching the banister briefly to slow my momentum and change my angle of trajectory. Square in my path stood Random, a sword dangling from his hand, mouth agape in surprise. He started to say something, raising his free hand in a placating gesture.

I never gave it a second thought. With a fluid motion I didn't need to calculate, I swept his feet out from under him with a side kick and slammed him up against the wall with an elbow to the ribs. He gasped and went down, dropping the sword. Before it could clatter to the floor I snatched it up and ran on.

I didn't bother to look back as he shouted for me to halt. I reached the second landing, dimly conscious of the pounding of booted feet on the stairs behind me and the muffled clank of some mechanism ahead.

I glanced up quickly, guided by an instinct I didn't know I possessed. A portcullis was dropping before me, cutting off my path.

I dropped to the ground and rolled beneath it, escaping the bottom spikes by scant inches as it clanged to the floor. I jumped to my feet and ran into the darkness below.

Good! They'd have to winch the thing back up again before they could follow.

As I descended, the torches became fewer and farther between. I didn't hesitate. I had made this journey a hundred or so times before.

Suddenly a man stepped out into a pool of torchlight just ahead. A guard, human. I knew him.

"Evan!" I hesitated.

It's one thing to knock another Amberite, even a king, out of your path, but I could really *hurt* this man. I didn't want to.

"Miss Bronwyn?" The shock was plain on his face.

We stared at each other for a couple of heartbeats. I leveled the sword at his midsection and enunciated clearly, so there would be no mistake.

"Get... out... of... my... way. Now!"

He got.

As I darted by him, I heard him murmur helpfully, "I don't think there's anyone else between you and the Pattern room..."

He was right. No one else stood in my way. The sounds of pursuit had faded into the distance upstairs. The silence was eerie.

By the time I reached the Pattern room I was bristling with goosebumps that had little to do with the fact that I wore nothing but a faded chenille bathrobe. No one was on duty by the door, which would have seemed strange if I had stopped to think about it. I didn't.

The door is heavy, and usually I need help with it. This morning I pushed it aside with one hand.

Inside the Pattern room I dropped the sword I had filched from Random. I approached the Pattern slowly, almost reluctantly, although I couldn't have explained my feelings to anyone at this point. It was my salvation, this I knew, and yet, unexplainably, I was afraid of it...

The first time I'd walked the Pattern I hadn't been afraid. Oh, I had heard the hundred or more horror stories about those of my relatives who had made the attempt and died, but it had never occurred to me for one moment that I would fail. Armed with all the good advice and the various strategies for negotiating the curves from Uncle Caine and Dad, I had stepped onto the Pattern willingly, eagerly, and was not too surprised when the walk became a dance...

Now, suddenly, I was terrified.

I had willingly embraced and used the vast, mysterious powers of the Abyss. Without a second thought, I had grasped the power that was available and twisted it to suit my needs. Up until that point Pattern had been the very source of my existence. What if it was jealous? What if it repudiated me now?

I hesitated, vacillating between eagerness and terror.

Some part of me argued that the Pattern was me, part of my genes and my heritage. Some other part urged caution.

Finally, the knowledge that sooner or later my pursuers would winch up the portcullis and follow spurred me to action. In moments, a dozen or so of my busybody relatives would no doubt be on hand to complicate matters. Life or death, it was my thing to do, and I wanted to do it alone. I stepped forward.

My first footfall should have signaled my triumph or sealed my fate. Instead, to my horror, nothing happened... to me.

I glanced down. The spark-shower should have been at least ankle high, if this was going to work. I should have felt some initial rush or bonding. There was nothing. There was no flare of power teasing and beckoning me toward the center. Something was terribly wrong!

I hesitated, only a moment, but that in itself should have been a fatal mistake. I caught myself, fighting panic, and took another determined step forward. Why? Don't ask! I just couldn't believe what was happening, but then I took a chance and glanced behind to where my foot had been a moment before, and the horror of it froze me to the spot. *Oh, Lords, what have I done?*

Where I had walked, the Pattern was dead and blackened, entirely lifeless. I stood rigid with shock, not daring to move. Reason screamed that I should be able to hear the Pattern writhing and wailing in its death-throes. Gazing wildly about me, it seemed that I could almost see this happening. The glowing path ahead seemed to undulate, as if in pain. But I felt nothing.

Lords!

I have to back off, I told myself, trying to stay as calm as possible lest, in my panic, I should inadvertently compound the damage I had caused. Carefully, not daring to consider what this was going to mean to me, I turned around and stepped off again.

If stopping the walk hadn't killed me, this certainly should have done the trick. But I was none the worse for wear... physically. I stood for a moment, not daring to look behind, hoping that by the time I got the courage to do so, things would have righted themselves and the Pattern would be whole again. Finally, I turned to look...

Where I had walked, my footsteps had killed the Pattern. It was as simple as that, I told myself. The Pattern is dying and you did it, Bronwyn. You did it. You really did it this time!

Reeling, I backed away in horror at what I had done and what it would mean to everything that was me and everything I had ever known or cared about. I threw my hands up in front of my face to cover my eyes, but it seemed that the devastation had burned its way into my brain and I couldn't shut out the sight! Then I tripped over Random's sword and went down in a heap on the floor of the Pattern room.

Here's where it gets really confusing. I sat there staring at the Pattern. Everything seemed crystal clear. Everything seemed irrevocable. I suppose I snapped. It occurred to me that anyone who kills a Pattern should die with it. Apparently, it wasn't able to kill me. I would have to do it myself. If I couldn't have Pattern, I couldn't have life. Didn't want it. Get it over with. End this. At least, I wouldn't have to live with the consequences...

I picked up the sword. The edges were very sharp. It felt big and awkward in my hands. I thought about running myself through, but I couldn't seem to get the leverage. I had some thought of slashing my wrists.

If I could steady the thing with my left hand and run my right wrist across it, that should do it. Then repeat with the left. Yes.

No. I guess I pressed too hard. As I have said, it was very sharp. Blood spurted.

I stared, stupefied, at the hand on the floor before me. It didn't seem to belong to me. Stupid, my mind told me, that's not what you meant to do. Now you don't have a hand!

But, I won't need one, another part of me reasoned. I'm going to be dead, after all...

I concluded it didn't really matter. I would be just as dead bleeding out from a severed hand as from slashed wrists. It all seemed very trivial and academic as I sat there watching the blood. I knew that there was something else I was supposed to be upset about, but I couldn't remember it. There was no pain. I do remember being surprised at that, just before everything faded...

"Okay. Hang on. I think she's coming out of it now."

Gee, that's Gérard's voice. I didn't know he was dead too...

A sudden pressure at my ankles; another at my left shoulder, at my right... I can't feel anything else. Maybe I'm being buried...

Huh! I felt a sudden shock. Hands on either side of my temples and the creepy feeling of someone slipping into my mind.

Now here's where instinct comes into play. Even dead, there are some things that are just, well, private. I went a little wild.

The mind that overlaid my own clamped down on my panic and confusion in a no-nonsense manner that was comforting and commanding, all at once. I felt a thread of sympathy, along with the sensation that resistance of any sort was about to meet with short shrift, but definitely. Harlan.

"It's okay." He shot a mental reassurance that was anything but. "Take it easy, Bronwyn. You're going to be all right."

"Nothing," I answered in kind, "is ever going to be all right again."

"Why not?"

How could he possibly understand? After all, he was Pattern blind, always had been. Lords, so was I! And all the horror came rushing back.

The grip on my shoulders and ankles got painful as I tried to twist away. The grip on my mind never wavered, just calmly set about shutting off all of my will to move as I struggled, and when I was still, it went on, matter of factly.

"The Pattern's not dying. Somebody fixed it. One of those guys from Corwin's Pattern that Kayen brought along. Fraid I didn't catch his name. He used one of those little black boxes, like Brand had in the Grove..."

"I don't believe you..."

"Well, uh, I guess you really don't have much choice, do you?"

Of course he was right.

I took a chance and opened my eyes. Gérard, Kayen and Godfrey were ranged around me, hanging on for dear life and watching me with tight, worried expressions. I wondered if they'd caught any of my mental conversation with Harlan. Apparently not.

"Who did this to her?" Kayen growled.

Harlan sighed. "Uh, no one. I mean, she did it to herself. Thought she killed the Pattern, so she tried to commit suicide."

His brief, psychic flash of contempt told me what he thought of that.

I was angry. After all, how was I supposed to react?

The others stirred, uncomfortable with this information. Godfrey murmured something about suicide being a really big sin. Gérard frowned and busied himself with some medical stuff, I don't know what. Looked like he had bandaged up my arm. It didn't hurt and I didn't much care, but I resented Harlan in my head and slammed my mental shields in place, forcing him psychically 'off balance'... for the space of a second or two.

His eyes widened in surprise, but it didn't take him much time to re-establish his controls. I still couldn't move, but at least he couldn't pick through my thoughts any more.

I looked down to where Kayen retained a death grip on my feet. They were beginning to get numb, and I wished he would let go. He caught my eye and smiled slightly, trying to be reassuring, I guess. He is almost too nice.

"Never was much good with a sword," I muttered, and he relaxed his grip a bit. My toes felt like pins and needles. Harlan was glaring at me, suspicion laced across his face.

"Don't try anything," he muttered darkly.

I wasn't about to, not just yet...

"Well, you've made a real mess of things, Bronwyn." Gérard can be merciless when he thinks he's got the upper hand. "There's probably not too much I can do about your hand. Oh, it will probably regenerate in a couple of years, but you're going to have to do without it for awhile. You're really lucky the blood vessels went into spasm like they did. You could have bled to death, you little fool."

All of this, of course, meant to comfort the suffering invalid. Where did he get his bedside manner?

I decided not to answer. I closed my eyes and let them thrash it out. Trying to figure out what to do about me.

Harlan still held me in his psychic grip, and I knew that as long as he did, nothing I could try to do would work. He couldn't read my thoughts, but then, I guess it didn't take a mind-reader to guess what I would do if I was free. He wasn't taking any chances. Somehow, I had to get them to relax.

If I could get away from them, it would be simple enough to finish what I had started. It didn't really matter that someone had saved the Pattern. As far as I was concerned, it was dead... to me...

And in the end, that was all that mattered to me now...

They started talking at me again, Harlan sending waves of calm and

reassurance battering against my shields, which were holding, just barely. I was feeling kind of weak: probably whatever pain-killer Gérard had pumped into my veins was having some sort of sedative effect as well. Kayen was nattering on about how we would try to get this thing straightened out and get my Pattern back, all of us together, and Gérard had taken another tack and was being sweet and sympathetic, all in a soothing voice that was beginning to get through to me, in spite of my resolve to resist them.

Finally, I heard myself promising them I wouldn't do anything foolish, and one by one they let me go. All except Harlan. Son of a...

I glared at him and he grinned!

Then Kelcey came in with the hand.

She was holding it behind her back, but it was pretty obvious, really, and tasteless, I thought in a weird, detached kind of way. Apparently she had some idea that Gérard would be able to suture it back on again. He and Kayen pulled her over into the corner and they discussed it for awhile. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I could see the disappointment on her face. Godfrey tried to put himself between me and them, I guess to keep me from seeing it.

I really didn't care, but I pretended not to notice them because, well, they were all trying so hard to be sensitive, and in our family that takes quite a bit of effort. You don't want to waste something like that.

They did something with the hand. I'm not sure what, but I didn't have to look at it. With the pressure bandage on the end of my arm, I could almost believe it was still there, even though I knew better. I pushed the thought away. Kelcey was sidling over to the couch where I was laying.

"Can I talk to her?" She seemed to be asking Harlan for permission.

He gave her a funny look. He can't quite accept the fact that most of us are a little in awe of his mental powers, Kelcey most of all. He nodded and sat back, releasing his touch on my head. Careful now. Don't move too fast!

I shifted my shoulders slightly, half turning in her direction. Harlan looked about ready to spring back, in case I did anything funny, so I was very careful to be slow and deliberate. No use rousing their suspicions again.

"What do you want?" I asked her, none too graciously.

She flushed slightly. I wasn't making this easy, after all.

"Look, I want you to know, I'm really sorry about what happened, about, um, your hand and everything..." She raced on before I could comment. "I really wish you'd Trumped one of us. Maybe we could have helped..."

I didn't answer. None of them could have helped. I knew that, even if they didn't.

"Anyhow... I just wanted to say... I'm really sorry..." She seemed to want some kind of reaction. The others were watching me closely. I relented, sourly.

"It doesn't matter. I don't care about the hand. This isn't even really

me... that's the whole point."

Suddenly, it seemed very important that I make this clear to them. Harlan made a sort of restive gesture just out of my line of vision. I knew he was ready to clamp down again, so I hurried on before they could get the wrong idea.

"Don't you see? It wasn't just the Pattern, although that was probably the worst. I don't even know who I am anymore!"

My voice had risen to a wail. Even I could hear the note of hysteria that was beginning to creep back in. The drugs must have been wearing off.

Gérard elbowed his way to the couch and put a warning hand on my shoulder.

"Easy!" he commanded. "Am I going to have to put you out? Harlan..."

"Wait!" Kelcey insisted, waving Harlan away with an imperious gesture. She insinuated herself between them and me like a pint-sized lioness protecting a cub.

"You can't make anything right for her by yelling at her. Why don't you let her try to work this out in her own way? She'll never get it straight if you keep knocking her out. Leave her alone."

"Can't let her try to kill herself again," Godfrey muttered. I wondered if he was worried about my soul.

Gérard set his jaw and began rummaging through his medical bag. But Kelcey wasn't finished.

"Gérard, *no*," she insisted. "Leave her alone. We have to talk."

He glared at her for a moment, then shrugged.

"Have it your way, then," he snarled. "I'm not responsible for what happens, understand?"

She nodded briefly, and they stared at each other for a moment, eyes locked in some sort of contest of will. Then he whirled and stomped out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

"Gee, I think you really made him mad," Harlan commented mildly.

His understatement sort of broke the tension in the room. Kayen risked a rueful chuckle and even Godfrey smiled. Kelcey shook herself and turned back to me.

I was careful to keep my face as expressionless as possible. My chief adversary was gone, and the rest of them had begun to relax their guard. In spite of their reassurances, I knew in my heart that nothing had really changed. If the Pattern was mended, well and good... for them. I was still a stranger to myself and a one-handed stranger at that. I knew I couldn't live this way, and I didn't want to try. But I couldn't let *them* know *that*.

"You're right about one thing, Bronwyn," Kelcey interrupted my train of thought. "That isn't you."

What am I, then?

She didn't know.

"I did some tests on the hand you chopped off." Kind of blunt. She wasn't trying to be pretty about this any more. Oddly enough, this steadied me. Call

it as you see it, Kelcey.

I nodded. "Yes, so..."

"It's not shape shift. No sign of that on the genetic level. I would know."

Kayen made a small noise of protest, but she ignored him and went on.

"So this isn't something that you've done to yourself, and I'm damned if I can see how Brand could have done it to you. I don't know what it all means, but it's all tied up with the Abyss somehow, unless I miss my guess. Before you take any more drastic action, I think you ought to try to see what you can do with it and how it works. Anyway, it's better than nothing at all..."

"But, I don't want it. I want to be like I was before."

She threw up her hands in anger or despair or some emotion that I couldn't fathom. I thought she looked tired and worn, but I was too busy feeling sorry for myself to give it much thought.

"What's it to you, anyway? Why should you care if I live or die?"

"Maybe I don't!" she hissed, exasperated. "But I should think you might. Aren't you even curious?"

She sat, cross-legged beside the couch, shoulders slumped, hands covering her eyes. I hadn't even noticed that Kayen had Trumped out until Godfrey brought him back. He had a big glass of something brown and nasty-looking in his hands. He sank down beside his sister and set it carefully on the floor. Then he pried her hands away from her face and made her drink it. She shuddered slightly, downed the mess, and he smiled reassuringly and patted her on the shoulder.

After a while, she began to look a bit restored.

"Anyway," she continued, "you seem to be handling this O.K."

Oh, right!

I opened my mouth to protest, but she went on without waiting for my reaction.

"Well, you don't feel weak, do you?"

I thought about this. Except for some residual effects of the pain-killers and blood loss, actually, I was feeling pretty well. Not good, but well. If I didn't look at the bandage on my arm, or in a mirror, I would almost be able to convince myself that... I had never felt better in my life? What kind of craziness was this?

"What are you getting at?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake. Don't you understand anything?" Something happened to you down there. Maybe that's your body and maybe it isn't. I don't know. But whatever it is, you've got a handle on something the rest of us don't, and maybe we're going to need whatever it is you've got. Maybe not. Believe me, there's still a lot going on that I don't understand. But I don't like it, not one bit! Don't ask me how I know. Trust me. Listen to me, for once in your life, because, *this isn't over yet! We... are... still... in... big... trouble!*"

Her urgency communicated itself to the others, maybe a little too well.

Kayen and Godfrey were on their feet. I don't even think that she knew that she was shouting.

They ranged around her, trying to calm her down enough to explain.

I took a chance and sat up, caught Harlan's eye. He was smiling.

"I think she's talking about power, Bronwyn," he remarked conversationally. Damn, the man's been inside my head once or twice too often. Thinks he knows what makes me tick, does he? Never again, I vowed silently, smiling back at him as I searched for the thread of power that linked me to the Abyss.

Then I found it.

Cautiously, I explored the little tendril of energy that connected me to... the whatever... It was hardly more than a thread, but it was definitely there and apparently supplying me with the wherewithal that was sustaining my current form. Just something little and innocuous that I hadn't even been conscious of before I looked. Maybe, if I could shut it off...

Still being very careful, I experimented. I couldn't shut it down no matter how I tried to sever the connection. I was beginning to get angry.

The others were gathered about Kelcey, who was feeling faint or something, and Kayen was making a bit of a fuss about her supposed weakness. Personally, I thought it was a sham, but I was grateful because it diverted the attention from me.

Given a few moments of peace, I made an attempt to void all the power that I had already gathered from the connection, back along the route it had come. The resistance was startling, and I had the disconcerting feeling of heat building up around me. It looked as if the connection only ran one way. O.K., let's try another approach...

Considering the link was as fragile as it seemed, I decided to draw on it as heavily as I could. Maybe I could overload the thing with its own power and it would snap of its own accord. I tried it.

Big, monumental mistake!

The power built slowly at first, then faster and faster, which was as I had hoped. But instead of burning up, the link just got stronger, feeding me more and more of the stuff at a rate that was heady and terrifying all at once! The couch began to smolder in an alarming fashion, and I jumped to my feet as my bathrobe burst into flames.

Kelcey shrieked and burst into flames of her own, which drove the others back, at first, then towards me when they realized the cause for her alarm. They reached me just as I dragged the burning bathrobe off and flung it away. Then I doused the power, with very little effort, back to the barely noticeable level it had been before. Too late! They were onto me!

Now Kelcey was burning, but nobody seemed to mind that. I guess people expect that kind of thing from shifters... they're a strange breed. I was another story. Having already established that I was mentally unbalanced, further demonstrations of inexplicable behavior were obviously not to be tolerated.

Harlan and Godfrey dove in my direction, then caught up short, staring. I opened my mouth to say something witty, and suddenly realized I was standing there in front of everybody wearing nothing but a pair of earrings and a pressure bandage! I was mortified!

Kayen, gentleman that he is, pretended not to notice and busied himself trying to beat out the flames that engulfed Gérard's couch. The others weren't so nice. I mean, they stared!

I wished that the ground would open up and swallow me. That's not what happened... exactly...

A growing pool of blackness spread outward from my feet, flames flickering about the edges. This was the way that Brand used to come and go, therefore suspect, but I didn't worry about what it would do to my reputation as I used it. That was already shot!

Get me out of here... it did. I had one last glimpse of their faces, laced with suspicion and possibly some appreciation (yeah, really!) and then I was gone.

I woke up, lying face down on black sand with the sound of the surf in my ears. At first, I thought I must have fallen asleep on the beach at Cabra, but I knew that was wrong. Home was never like this!

Then I remembered. I even recognized the place... after all, I had created it. I was in the Abyss.

My arm hurt terribly. I supposed that Gérard's pain-killers had worn off, or burned out of my body during the transition. I struggled to wall off the pain receptors, and was marginally successful. I couldn't help but think how much easier this would be if I still had the Pattern at my command. I was feeling pretty sorry for myself.

In the space of the last few hours, I had assaulted the King, nearly destroyed the Pattern, cut off my hand in a bungled suicide attempt, scared my cousins half to death... let's see, anything else? Oh, yes... I had set Gérard's sitting room on fire. Quite a morning.

Now I was alone in the Abyss and cut off from everything I knew and cared about. Hysteria seemed to be as good as any of the other options I had, so I cried, then laughed, then cried again, until the gamut of emotions wore itself out and left me empty and exhausted.

And I still didn't have any clothes...

Then I got this creepy feeling that maybe I wasn't alone, after all.

Way out on the edge of my senses I caught a brief flicker of... something. Not a call or a challenge. Whoever or whatever it was, was being much too cagey to approach me directly. But there was a presence, I was sure, and that made me curious.

Cautiously, I extended a light psychic net. Not strong enough to arouse any suspicions, I hoped, but just enough to tell me what was there. I got enough to confirm the fact that someone was watching, but decided to withdraw the net before it could give me away. Whatever was out there, I

was going to have to be very careful. I mean, suppose it was Brand?

I didn't think so, but there was no way to be sure without luring the watcher into the open. This would have to be done with extreme delicacy...

Again, with the lightest touch I could manage, I erected some psychic shields and considered the problem. I didn't think I would be able to hide. The watcher was probably aware of me, which was what had drawn him here in the first place. What to do?

I decided to encourage the idea that I was weak and helpless, but first I opened up the link to the power around me, still shielding, and drew in as much as I could without bursting into flame. Thus armed, I dropped the shields and concentrated on the pain in my arm and a general feeling of despondency, which wasn't too hard to do in my present state.

It almost worked too well, and by the time he swooped down for the kill I was close to losing it again.

It was Lance!

I was as surprised to see him as he was to see me. Fortunately, this drove most of my weakness away. Unfortunately, he was pretty strong, himself...

We grappled for a moment on a mental level, but even with one arm I can take Lance. He realized this rather quickly, and struck me with a flash of light and heat that surprised me with the depth of his control over it. He broke free and swooped away in a gout of fire like the devil was after him.

I was...

I flamed up and followed as though I had been doing this sort of thing all my life. He tried to put some distance between us, but I kept up with no trouble. Apparently, there are some limits to this form. I wasn't closing on him, either.

All in all, he had it down pretty well. After all, he'd had days, maybe longer, to perfect his techniques...

I relaxed then, content to follow until he ran out of steam. I'm a pretty quick study, myself, and no one can run forever. We sped on over the Fire Zone at a steady clip.

Finally, it became pretty obvious that Lance was headed somewhere in particular. Then I saw the spires of Brand's castle through the smoke and realized his objective. In spite of the heat, *that* sent a chill down my spine! I pushed my fears aside and kept going, close on his tail as he darted through an arch and disappeared into the depths of the castle. I followed, half expecting Brand to spring out from behind some buttressed wall and kill me.

If Brand was there, he never bothered to let us know about it...

I found Lance in the parody of a throne room which apes the one in Amber in hideous detail. He was sitting on... you guessed it... trying to make a brave face of things, with little tongues of flame flickering about his features the way our late (I hoped) uncle used to do when he was trying to make an impression. I had to steel myself to remember that this was Lance's darker side I was dealing with. His good side must still be trapped

in the Trump I had stuck him in a few days ago. Apparently, no one had bothered to go looking for him.

Wonderful! I was dealing with a psychotic, for sure.

"I am the Lord of the Abyss!" he thundered. *"Kneel down and acknowledge me, and I will be merciful!"*

Now you just *have* to laugh at something like this!

I guess I wasn't being properly respectful. I guess he took umbrage.

He sent a huge gout of flame shooting in my direction. I absorbed it with a shrug and strolled over to lean up against the throne.

"Uh, Lance..." I posed in my best conversational manner. "Don't you think you're overdoing this a bit?"

He answered with a sudden blast of heat that was staggering in its intensity, but otherwise harmless. I was beginning to lose patience.

"Cut it out!" I ordered. "Just cut out all this nonsense and we'll have a nice talk, you and me... oh, and while you're at it... *Get... out... of... my... chair!*"

Then he attacked for real, but I flamed up again and gave him some fire of my own. In a few seconds we had reached sort of a Mexican standoff, so I threw in a little psychic hotfoot just for laughs. He got mad and tried a little shape-shift trick to scare me. I turned up the power until he began howling for everything short of his mama.

It was fun. I had him squirming now. I threw in a few of the psychic dirty-tricks I'd been saving for a rainy day... you know, the ones you don't dare try on someone like Harlan or Dad... and held him there till he was begging *me* for mercy. Take that! And that!

Oh well, what can I say. I'm a bully...

Finally, I reached out with my good hand and gave him a shove that sent him sprawling on the floor. He stayed there, groveling, which appealed to my sense of esthetics. I stepped over his flailing limbs and sat down on the throne.

"Now, Lance... tell me... Who's the Queen of the Abyss?"

He glared at me, furious, and started to rise. I thought he was going to do something foolish, so I kicked him squarely in the chest and sent him to the floor again. This time, he stayed where he belonged.

He mumbled something in a voice too low for me to hear.

"Louder!"

"You are," he whispered.

"I can't hear you. I am... *what? Say it, Lance.*"

"You're the Goddam Queen of the Abyss, Bronwyn!" he shouted, and I sat back with a satisfied sigh. Boy, did that sound good...

"Nice of you to say so, Lance," I told him. "And now that we've got that out of the way, you and I are going to have a little chat..."



So we talked. He was belligerent and hostile, and while I didn't really blame him I was very firm about what I wanted to know, so he told me. He had roamed around the Abyss since we had left it, searching for signs of occupancy. There was no one else around. He said he believed that Caine had come and done something with Brand, or at least with Brand's corpse, and I believed him. That sounded like the sort of thing that Uncle Caine would do. He has never forgiven himself for not making sure, the first time...

Of Deirdre, there was no trace. No one at all except for himself... and now, me.

He told me about the little black creatures, slug-like in appearance, that were indigenous to the Abyss. Brand had used them to fashion his minions. Lance thought they could be made into anything, and had been considering what to do with them when I returned. They weren't intelligent, he assured me, and they really didn't care what you made of them. This presented some possibilities, but I didn't discuss them with him.

He had searched Brand's castle for Trumps and come up empty-handed. This was a blow, but I didn't let on. I was hoping for some way to communicate with the others. At least, I could call Random and apologize for decking him. But my Trumps were probably still in my room in Amber. I hadn't bothered to grab them on my way to the Pattern room this morning. Oh well, I was going to have to come up with an alternate plan.

First thing on my agenda was finding something to wear. Lance was ogling me in an unpleasant way and I didn't want to lose my hard-won advantage. I have found it is almost impossible to win an argument when your opponent is wearing clothes and you're not. I made him show me where Brand and Deirdre's personal quarters had been located, and rummaged around in her closet for awhile until I came up with something that looked as if it might fit.

I had to hack it apart, the skirt and the blouse, because we seem to be built differently, Deirdre and me. I didn't do a very good job of it one-handed, and the blouse barely covered what was necessary by the time I was through with it. The skirt I cut off about mid-thigh on myself because Deirdre apparently wears her skirts *very* narrow. I knew I'd have trouble walking.

The result was not quite what I had hoped and the colors were all wrong, but at least I was decent, or almost...

When that was settled, I sent Lance to find me some of the slug things. He returned with a bunch of them, and I set about making my own psychic probes of the critters. I had a plan, but I knew I couldn't bring myself to use them if they were sentient.

The slugs were about as intelligent as bread dough and almost as malleable. I'm not a sculptress, but I found if I put my will to it, I could command the things to take just about any shape that I desired. This was good. I played with them a bit, making all manner of jewelry, and finally I got my courage up to try something really tough, like an owl. It darn well

looked like an owl! It made noises like an owl... well...

It was really a pretty creditable owl...

Lance had hung around all this time, asking me questions like what I planned to do now and were we going to attack Amber soon...

Attack Amber! Good heavens, the thought had never crossed my mind!

Then I got to thinking... If Lance could make this conclusion, what about the others? They had no way of knowing what I was thinking, and were already convinced that I wasn't playing with a full deck. After all, I had actually attacked Random this morning. I knew I was going to have to reassure them... But how?

Worse still, the pain in my arm was beginning to become a bit less easy to control. If I showed any sign of weakness at all, Lance would come down on me like a ton of bricks. I knew I was going to have to rearrange my priorities to cover these problems.

I sent Lance on an errand to get him out of the way. I wanted privacy for my next little project because I wasn't sure how it would come out. Then I set my mind to shaping some of the slugs into a hand.

Actually, it sounds a lot harder than it was, but I was very careful, taking things slow and easy because I didn't want to make a mistake. When I was finally satisfied I took the pressure bandage off of my right arm, and nearly passed out from the pain and the shock of seeing the stump where my right hand should be. I sat there for a moment, sweating and sick, and was heartily glad I had sent Lance away... I knew I had to get cracking before he returned and saw me so weak and vulnerable.

As soon as my stomach settled down, I took the hand and gingerly placed the end of it in line with the stump, being as careful as I could to line it up properly. This is not a job for the squeamish, and only desperation got me through it.

When it was in place, I concentrated on willing the ends to join and knit the nerves and blood vessels back together. It was scary and painful, and I really had no idea if it was going to work at all. By the time I was finished I was in tears and gagging. But I had done this to myself, and it was up to me to fix it if I could.

When it was done I settled back to wait until the pain lessened, propping myself against a wall in case Lance came back unexpectedly. I was determined to give myself a fighting chance, at least. It took a long time, I think, and I drifted in and out of consciousness for a time, but fortunately I got myself together... literally...

As soon as I was able to move it without passing out, I began trying to exercise my wrist and fingers. Surprisingly, this wasn't too difficult to do. The thing was acting pretty much like a real hand was supposed to act. Even the area where I had joined it to the stump of my arm had faded to an angry red line that seemed to be healing up quickly.

I held it up in front of my face and flexed the fingers and the wrist, waiting for it to do something weird like grab me around the throat in a

strangle-hold. Instead, I found that it obeyed my mental commands just like my original hand would have done. It even hurt a little when I bit the tip of my finger in a little experiment I was glad I didn't have to explain to anyone. Not bad...

When Lance returned, I was waiting for him, sitting calmly on the throne, with my new hand and my clothes and a new-found general sense of well-being. I had fashioned some of the slugs into bracelets and placed them around my arms. I would draw on their energy to bolster my own if I got caught away from my supply line, and I had the feeling I might. After all, my next step was going to be trying to re-establish contact with my family. For what it was worth, I owed them a few explanations and a few apologies.

I set to work trying to pick Lance's brain for everything he knew about Brand's method of using Abyss power to travel. The news wasn't too encouraging, and confirmed my suspicion that Abyss was nowhere near as handy to use as Pattern as a means of getting from one place to another.

I was going to have to take it with me, by enlarging my little link with the Abyss and opening an actual conduit that would connect me with the Abyss itself. This was why Brand always appeared out of a black hole with fire all around. Oh well, it would have to do...

Lance was still pressing me for details about the invasion he was so sure I was planning, so I told him we would have to take things slowly and that I would have to do some reconnaissance first. I think he was hoping for a more decisive approach, but he pretended to be content and started telling me all about the wonderful conquests we would make once I had established myself as Queen with him as my consort. I could see where all of this was heading, and it certainly didn't figure into any plans of mine. I wasn't about to tell him this, of course, because I still figured he could be of use to me, if I didn't put his nose too far out of joint.

As soon as possible, I was going to have to figure out some way to rejoin this part of him with the other half. Both of his portions were pretty annoying, taken separately. I wondered why Lance had always seemed so endearing when he was whole.

He was getting on my nerves... big time!

Finally, I left him on guard in the Abyss and opened my conduit to Amber. I was aiming for Gérard's rooms, where I had left my cousins, deciding to test the waters with them before I got on to something really sticky... like apologizing to Random. If I could convince the others that I was on the up and up, it might be easier going with the King. I figured he was going to be pretty mad about the kick and the shove and the sword and the Pattern and things...

I was right on target. I could see this from the scene in the room when the smoke and the initial fires cleared away. When I opened the link I thought I heard voices, but when the hole was finally large enough to step through to the room... no one was there... I guess they must have been called away

suddenly.

I looked around, even in the bedroom next door, but the rooms were empty. I felt bad about missing them, but I wasn't comfortable enough to leave the conduit and go looking around. I decided to go back to the Abyss and make some more of the slugs into bracelets... sort of a portable power source. Then, when I had more protection, I could come back.

I pulled a sheet of paper from a note pad on Gérard's desk that read:

H.R.H. GERARD, M.D.
F.A.C.S.
ST. FRANCIS HOSPITAL
PEORIA, ILLINOIS

On it I wrote:

*Sorry to have missed you. I'm O.K. Got a few problems
to work out, but when I do, I'll be back...*

Love,

Bronwyn

There. That ought to do it...

Then I stepped back through the conduit and closed it around me. I set to work making slugs into bracelets and necklaces, and tested them to see just how much power I could draw. It wasn't too satisfactory, but I knew that if push came to shove I could always open the conduit back up again. This would give me enough power to keep me going in a pinch, and at least keep the others from bullying me too badly.

I was getting pretty hungry, and more curious about what was going on in Amber as the time wore on. Most of all, I just wanted to be around home again, instead of this strange place with only the nasty side of Lance for company. His suggestion that we make the slugs into steaks or something just didn't appeal to me. I knew I wouldn't be able to bring myself to eat them...

So I told him I was going to try to go back again, and brushed aside his demands to go with me. I left him 'on guard' once more, but this time I opened the conduit into a disused portion of the castle, down in the dungeons. I picked the room where they had imprisoned Corwin years ago, partly for sentimental reasons and partly because I knew no one would be on guard down there.

It had occurred to me that opening the conduit, while necessary, was not a very creditable way to appear, for purely political reasons. It seemed wise for me to disassociate myself, as much as was possible, from anything that would remind them of Brand.

I'm not a coward, but I knew they had very little reason to trust me. No

use inviting trouble.

I reached the dungeon without incident, and spent a few minutes looking at the faded drawing of the lighthouse at Cabra that Dworkin had etched on the wall so many years ago. I knew from the histories that it functioned like a Trump, and was half tempted to use it to take me home. But that would solve nothing, and I had a lot to do...

I made my way to the stairway, and after a few false turns found the proper set that led to the castle above. I resisted the impulse to go down and look at the Pattern. Since my return to the Abyss, I had found myself less and less worried about my lack of Pattern contact.

As I made the long climb I thought about what this might possibly mean, and concluded that the use of Abyss power was beginning to undermine my self-image. I knew I mustn't lose sight of the fact that basically, I am a creature of the Pattern, no matter what it seemed like now, and keep my priorities in order.

Usually Amber castle is bustling with servants, so the lack of people in the halls was disconcerting, reminding me of Brand's fake castle in the Abyss. I was tempted to call out, "Hello... anybody there?" But I decided this lacked a certain dignity...

The Grand Hall was deserted, but the Staircase was well lit and nothing seemed to be out of order, so I went on, headed for the second floor where the second generation had their rooms. I was headed for Gérard's, hoping the others had returned. If not, I'd try our rooms on the third...

As I was going up the stair, something was coming down. That's right... something... a little point of light, kind of like Tinkerbelle in the children's tale, darting and pulsing along in a merry fashion, until it saw me and stopped short.

What in the world?

It looked pretty harmless, but it seemed to be studying me, so I kept my guard up. Psychic shields... the whole nine yards... We regarded each other for a moment or two, neither me nor Tinkerbelle making a move. Then I felt the light touch of a tiny psychic probe.

I took a big chance and dropped my shields. It didn't look strong enough to undermine my psyche.

The little thing stayed in there some time picking through my memories, not staying fixed on any one train of thought for very long. Seemed like it was looking for a sort of general overview. Apparently it found what it wanted to know, because it withdrew finally without doing any particular damage that I could tell. I hoped I had passed whatever test I'd been given.

Then I heard the sound of slow, heavy footsteps on the stair above me, and glanced up to see a monster rounding the bend at the landing, headed in my direction. I turned to run, then stopped, teased by a memory of something I'd seen, not long ago.

When they had thrown us in the dungeon... heavens... only five days

ago... some nasty looking creatures had broken in, ripped apart what we thought was Uncle Caine, and beaten us silly. Later we had realized that these creatures were created and controlled by the real Uncle Caine, when he appeared, explained what was happening, and generally finished the job the creatures had started... but I already told you this, remember?

This looked like one of them. Sort of a cross between a dinosaur and a demon. Caine doesn't make them pretty, but he does make them big! It shifted its head from side to side as if it was looking for something. I sincerely hoped it wasn't me, but was too intrigued to cut and run at this point. I had to see what it was going to do...

Finally it sighted the Tinkerbelle thing and seemed satisfied, much to my relief. The fairy darted over and whirled around it furiously. Uh-oh, I thought, I hope it's not telling the other one to kill me.

I figured it was too late to run, so I just stood there trying to project an aura of harmlessness and generally basic 'nice'. Shoot, this will never work!

Somehow, it did. The big creature cocked its massive head to one side and studied me intently. I smiled and thought my face was going to crack.

After a moment, I reached out with a gentle psychic touch.

'Uncle Caine, if that's you, please answer...'

Nothing... tangible. This thing was only slightly brighter than Abyss slugs... but, maybe... just maybe it could imprint and record. I tried it.

'Uncle, it's me, Bronwyn, and I'm in big trouble. I'm stuck in this Abyss form and I can't get out, but I'm loyal to Amber and I didn't mean to hurt the Pattern, really! Tell Random I'm sorry...

There was no response. I had no way of telling if anything was getting through. The creature and the fairy seemed to be communicating, but not on any level I could fathom. It shook its massive head once or twice, and then continued towards me down the stairs. Cautiously, I moved out of the way, resisting the temptation to open the conduit and get the heck out of there. It took everything I had to stay still and keep projecting trust and harmony. The thing passed me and went on.

I leaned against the wall, shaking with relief, and watched the two creatures until they were out of sight, heading towards the rear of the castle, towards the stairs that led to the Pattern.

I turned up the stairs and headed for Gérard's rooms.

I was brought up short by a burst of rapid explosions coming from the second floor. Without another thought I took off running in the direction of the noise. All my instincts screamed I should be doing just the opposite.

When I reached Gérard's rooms the door was open, and voices raised in excitement bubbled out at me. There was a strange smell in the air, like something burning...

I burst into the room and saw my cousins, minus Kelcey, gathered around the corpse of one of the big creatures on the floor. Godfrey was standing there with some sort of weapon in his hand, looking proud and

satisfied.

They noticed me all at once and began shouting. The door to Gérard's bedroom opened a crack and Eleanor peeped out, timorously. I thought there was someone behind her, but I couldn't be sure...

"What have you done?" I shouted, just to get their attention. I had it. Harlan gave me a hard look, his eyes moving to my right arm. No time to explain. I crossed the room and knelt by Caine's creature. Sure enough, it was dead.

"The creature was attacking us, so I shot it," Godfrey explained.

"Why?" I asked him. "This is one of Caine's tame monsters. They've never harmed us before..." I broke off and gave Kayen a guilty glance. We had never told Godfrey and Harlan what really happened in the dungeon. After all, they'd been working for the enemy at the time.

He shrugged, helping me to my feet.

"It burst in here a few moments ago, and headed straight at us. I guess we just reacted..."

The warrior types always seem to 'just react', I thought sourly, but refrained from comment on that score. No use causing more hard feelings.

"I just passed one on the stairway," I told them. "First there was the little fairy thing, then the big one. They just studied me for a moment and went on..."

I broke off, then. Harlan was staring at me in horror.

"Fairy thing? Like a little point of light...?"

"Yes, have you seen it?"

Godfrey took a step forward, stopped short with a sick expression on his face as something crunched under his feet.

"This is all your fault, Harlan!" he accused. He picked up the edge of the rug and peered under it. The expression on his face would have been comical under any other circumstances.

I looked under the rug. The crushed and broken body of one of the Tinkerbellies lay just beyond the reach of the outstretched arms of the dinosaur.

"I'm sorry..." Harlan began. "I just tried to contact it psychically..."

Now, I know what psychic contact with Harlan can do to my mind. I considered the size of the fairy and shuddered.

"Sheesh... you fried it," I muttered.

"What's it doing under the rug?" I asked them.

They exchanged glances.

"That was Godfrey's idea..." Harlan said defensively.

"I think they call it 'getting rid of the evidence'," said a voice I hadn't heard before. I glanced up at the man who had emerged from the bedroom, noting Eleanor peering at me from behind him. Must be an ally. She's careful about stuff like that...

Two things struck me immediately. One was a set of psychic shields clamped firmly in place, and the second was Pattern to burn. Literally.

This guy had at least as much as I could handle, if things were normal... plus hints of contained Pattern emanating from several points on his person, as though he could keep extra bits of it in his pockets and things.

Weird.

"I'm Herdan," he said, as if that explained it. he didn't offer to shake hands...

"I don't think the thing was attacking us," he went on, before I could ask where he fit into the scheme of things. He moved out into the room, studying the creature. Then he moved around facing Godfrey, stretched an arm in the direction the creature had been taking as it 'attacked', and pointed straight at the place where Godfrey was still holding up the rug to peer at the fairy.

"Yes, I believe it was trying to reach its... uh, ally," he remarked off-handedly. Godfrey glowered at him.

"Well, how was I supposed to know that?" he demanded.

"Nice going, Godfrey," Kayen told him, jumping on the bandwagon. "How are you going to sweep *that* under the rug?"

"This is all Harlan's fault!" Godfrey insisted.

I looked at Harlan.

"Why do you let him talk to you that way?" I asked him.

He only shook his head and shrugged.

Godfrey was looking at the fireplace with the dawn of an idea on his face...

"Maybe we could burn it..."

"Oh, yeah... right!" Kayen said, disgusted. "It'd take us hours and probably stink like hell..."

I turned to Herdan, making a conclusion in a flash that concerned unknown relatives and black boxes.

"I take it I have you to thank for fixing the Pattern," I told him.

"Yeah," he grinned, "I take it you're the one who messed it up."

I'll say this for him, he was quick on the uptake. Corwin's boys have always been a witty bunch. Then I moved away. All that Pattern was making me itch...

Harlan was trying to resist Godfrey's attempts to make him help move the creature into Gérard's fireplace. I didn't think it was going to fit, and doubted whether we could hide what had been done for very long anyway. Sooner or later, Uncle would come looking for his beasties and the waste material would surely hit the rotary oscillator... but Godfrey was being a bully and I felt sorry for Harlan, who looked as if he'd like to join the fairy under the rug.

"I'll take care of it," I offered, and he shot me a grateful look which turned into shocked surprise as I opened a conduit right there in the room and shoved the thing into the Abyss. Kayen and Eleanor were staring at me, horrified. Herdan looked interested in a technical sort of way. Godfrey picked up the fairy on the end of his sword and flicked it into the hole.

"There!" he exclaimed, satisfied. I closed up the conduit with a sigh and waited for the inevitable questions.

"Um... that was the Abyss... right?" Harlan seemed to be having trouble wording things...

"Yeah, so?" I decided to be casual about the whole thing. "Well, Kelcey said I should go back and see what I could do with it... so I did. Where is she, anyway?"

Smart, Bronwyn, divert the attention...

"She left," Kayen told me unhelpfully. That much was obvious. He was staring at my arm. I held up my new hand and wiggled the fingers.

"It seems I can do rather a lot with it," I began, hoping to allay their suspicions by showing them something positive. They didn't look convinced.

"Yeah," Harlan muttered. "Seems like you can..."

That from the guy for whom I had just concealed a murder. That's gratitude for you...

"How are you feeling?" from Kayen. "No weakness or fatigue?" He was watching me narrowly, face tight and frowning. I wondered what I had done to offend him.

"No," I said honestly, "I feel fine."

He shook his head.

"You're not shaky? Or hungry?"

"Well, I could eat... but, no, I don't feel weak or anything. Why?"

"I think Kelcey's having some problems. She's blocking my calls or something so I can't be sure, but this Abyss stuff seems to be having a funny effect on her..."

"What do you mean, blocking your calls?" I asked him, only partly to divert the attention again. Kayen is the only one she usually answers. The only one.

"The power isn't bothering you at all?" he went on as if I hadn't spoken. "You just use it, huh, no problem..."

It was like an accusation, and I was hurt. It was all I had, for Pete's sake!

"Was that you before?" Eleanor asked suddenly. "Opening up that hole?"

I nodded, and she moved a little closer to Kayen.

"What's the problem?" I demanded. "What's wrong with you..."

"We thought it was Brand..." she murmured, and suddenly I understood.

Of course they did...

"Didn't you get my note?"

"Oh yeah, we got it all right."

Somehow I had scared them. Great. Not what I had intended to do at all.

I looked at Herdan, who was watching us all with an amused expression on his face. Of course, he hadn't been around when Brand was up to his

shenanigans, so he had less reason than the others to feel threatened by conduits and flames. A potential ally? I considered it. No. Too much of an unknown factor. Too much... well... Pattern, if you must know!

Kelcey! Much as I hated to admit it, I realized that she, of all of them, would be the most able to understand what I was up against. I knew she had used the power herself, although from what Kayen was saying I gathered she was not fully in control or something.

I had to get Kelcey back here, if only to explain to the others that I was on the up and up. I needed help. She had helped me once before. It was certainly worth a try.

I moved over to Kayen, trying to ignore the way Eleanor and the others moved out of my path like I was contaminated or something. He frowned down at me, deviled by his own problems.

I said gingerly, "Do you know where she is?"

"Not precisely. I'm not getting the impression that anything is wrong, but the contact is blocked somehow..."

"Try calling her..." I suggested.

"I've been trying for the last hour!" he flared, "Every five damned minutes..."

Ooh, this is going to be touchy!

"Try again," I urged. "Maybe this time..."

He glared at me and yanked a Trump from his pocket. Not a whole deck, just one. Apparently he'd been using it off and on for awhile and had it separate from the others.

He concentrated, frowning, concentrated again, and broke off with an abrupt start.

"See," he snarled, "I told you it was blocked! Try it yourself, if you don't believe me."

"Oh, I believe you," I insisted. "Let's see. Does it feel as if she's blocking, or is it something else... something external?"

"I don't know!" The anger was raw on his face, mixed with worry and a look of helplessness I could relate to some of my own feelings. It's very unpleasant to be cut off from your allies. Maybe I could help him and Kelcey, and myself along with them. I knew I had to try.

"I'm no expert with these things," he muttered lamely. "I just know I can't get through..."

"Harlan." I didn't know if he would help, but he was the expert. I indicated that he should take the Trump that Kayen was holding out to me.

"Right!" He straightened up and dragged the biggest Trump deck that I had ever seen from a case at his belt, thumbing through them and dealt out a card I assumed to be Kelcey's. He concentrated, his frown matching Kayen's, then he whistled.

"What is it?"

"She's not doing it. She's shielding... I guess for her own protection, but she's not the one that's messing up the Trump."

Kayen's hand went to his axe in an involuntary move, guided by instinct, I guessed. He stopped abruptly, snarling in impotent rage.

"She's in trouble! I knew it! Can you get to her, Harlan? Can you break it?"

Harlan shook his head.

"No. Damn! And this is my Trump! Whatever's doing this..." He broke off. "Help me." It wasn't a request. We moved in to comply.

If they were squeamish about touching me they didn't show it, as we made contact with each other to unite our mental powers for Kelcey's sake. We made a respectable attempt. It wasn't enough.

I felt a thread of tenuous contact, laced with a feeling of appeal that bordered on desperation. There was a crazy shift of power. Something was locking this thing down tight, pulling her out of our reach. I could feel Harlan struggling to control the Trump and Kelcey trying to hang on from the other end. She was weak, though, barely conscious, and I heard Kayen's mental cry of anguish as she started to slip from our grasp.

But I had gotten kind of a fix on her location, and while the others strained to maintain the link I reached out with all the strength of the Abyss and punched a conduit through to the place where she was lying, back to a wall, dagger in her hand.

She screamed, just once, horribly as I drew her through. Then she was slumped in my arms, unconscious but safe in Amber.

All hell broke loose. Godfrey and Kayen grabbed her away from me, Kayen screaming her name over and over. There was no response. Eleanor made a dash for the door, shouting for Gérard, but Harlan already had his Trump in hand. Herdan was peering at her through one of his little black boxes, which he seemed to be using as a lens. Somebody pushed me away and I crouched on the floor, shaking with a reactive chill.

"Is she alive?" I managed to croak.

"Yes, no thanks to you..." Gérard shot over his shoulder. "What the hell did you do?" He pulled the syringe out of her arm and she sat up, flailing, then slumped back against Kayen and opened her eyes.

I sat up, wrapping my arms around my knees, and waited for the tirade.

"Bronwyn," she said weakly, "thank you..." She was very pale. She stretched a hand in my direction and I took it, in spite of the glares I was getting from Gérard and the others.

"But, please..." the mental voice was faint, "...don't ever touch me with that stuff again..."

"Kayen, stop fussing please," she said aloud, still hanging onto my hand. "Could you please get me something to eat? I'm starving..."

She was so thin... I believed it.

Gérard looked from one to the other of us, bristling with anger. Then he turned and stomped out of the room again, like he had done before under very similar circumstances. As he left, I realized to my relief that he never even noticed the mess we'd made of his sitting room...

Kelcey looked like death warmed over, or maybe a little worse than that. I did some rapid calculations. She had only been gone for a couple of hours or so, but she looked like she'd spent about three months in a concentration camp. I sincerely hoped that it was nothing I had done to her.

She was croaking something about being hungry in a weak little voice, and the menfolk were tripping over each other in a dead heat to the bell-pull. Eleanor was looking hopeful about the prospect of a meal as well, so Godfrey, who had won the race, ordered up dinner for everyone... in Gérard's sitting room, for pity's sake!

I wasn't particularly hungry, and wasn't anxious to be caught snacking if Uncle Gérard decided to come back. Someone was going to answer for all the damage to his rooms, when he finally got around to noticing it, and I always manage to get the blame for things like that. I decided to be elsewhere when the waste material hit the rotary oscillator. Discretion is the better part of valor.

I wanted my Trumps. I'd dashed out of my room in such a panic that I'd forgotten them... not that there are any pockets in my bathrobe anyway. And with any luck at all, I might be able to find a pair of sandals or something that would fit these... *Feet!*

I slipped away without attracting any attention while the others were preoccupied with the food that had been brought. Fine.

Outside the door to my room I hesitated, suddenly struck by a 'feeling' I couldn't define. Not exactly a psychic emanation... I felt as though someone or something waited within. Probably for me.

No good. Anyone with any real business there would have waited outside, or sent my maid to look for me. I got suspicious.

Deciding against a psychic probe, I removed one of my slug-bracelets from my arm and began shaping it into a window. With this attached to my door and powered by the energy of the Abyss, I should be able to spy on the welcoming committee without giving myself away. So far from its source of power, the process took a lot longer than I expected. The slug just wasn't shaping up as easily as it had in the Abyss, and I concentrated on thinning it out, manipulating the stuff until it was transparent.

When I looked up again I had company. My Aunt Fiona stood about a yard to my left, watching me intently. I tried to ignore her, hoping she'd get bored and go away. No luck.

"What do you want?" I asked brusquely.

Might as well get straight to the point. Fiona and I never waste much time on pleasantries.

She frowned.

"Why are you using Abyss energy in Amber?" she asked.

I refrained from pointing out that it was the only thing I had. She knew that.

"Because I think there's somebody in my room, and I want to have a look before I go in," I answered, honest if not cordial.

I figured that if my using the power was really bothering her, she would tell me to stop or offer to help with something of her own that would be more acceptable. She did neither, just stood there watching me work. Next time I looked up, I saw that Llewella had joined us.

"Getting to look like an 'Aunt' hill here," I remarked. "So... where's Flora?"

They weren't particularly amused.

"What *are* you doing?" Llewella demanded.

I have nothing against Aunt Llewella. I simply don't know her very well. As patiently as I was able, I explained again about the 'something' in my room.

Now I had two bug-eyed observers. This was annoying me, and I was sorely tempted to tell them both to go away and mind their own business. But my 'window' was just about ready, so I decided to ignore them and give it a go.

It should have worked. It didn't, though.

Whatever! I was new at this. Apparently I'd done something wrong, or else the intruder I was dealing with defied observation.

Fiona was smirking. Exasperated, I threw all caution to the wind, grabbed the knob and flung the door inward, sidestepping quickly. If something jumped out, it could darn well have Fiona!

There was a huge pit in the middle of my room, descending to the Abyss in a familiar manner. Some kind of critter was just beginning to sink back into the gloom below.

"Stop!" I ordered, recognizing the thing as one of the type Brand had used as his minions.

It stopped, peering stupidly out of the hole where my Aubusson carpet used to be.

"Master?" it inquired.

"Yes," I answered.

"Your voice sounds funny," it complained.

I considered this.

"This is the only voice you have to answer from now on," I informed it.

"O.K." Agreeable critter, anyhow. "Master, I have failed to complete my appointed task."

This surprised me. I couldn't remember assigning any tasks in the Abyss, except to Lance, and that had been of the 'watch and wait' variety.

Either this was one of Brand's left-overs, or Lance was taking on just a little too much authority. Looked like I was going to have to straighten him out again.

"Refresh my memory," I told it. "What task did I give you?"

Eyes like red hot coals swiveled in its scaly head as it seemed to consider my question. I was just thinking I'd overplayed the 'master' bit, when in answered, "To find the Lady Bronwyn and take her back."

"Oh, yes, of course. Yes, well..." I managed to agree, before it had a

chance to doubt me further. "Well, carry on. Keep looking."

"O.K.," it replied inanely. Then it sank into the conduit hole, which closed abruptly, returning my room and my rug to their natural appearance. Only a touch of brimstone lingered.

Puzzled, I looked around for Fiona and Llewella, to see if anything on their faces could provide a clue to the experience. They were gone, and so was my 'slug-window'.

Snarling in frustration, I snatched my Trumps from the dresser and left, completely forgetting that I had meant to find some shoes.

"Bronwyn! Bronwyn, is that you?" The little tinny, tiny voice reminded me of another piece of unfinished business that I was going to have to address as soon as possible.

"Yes, it's me," I snapped. "Don't bother me now, Lance. I'm busy."

His 'good' side, trapped inside my Trump, was every bit as bothersome as the 'bad' side I'd left in the Abyss. I was in no mood...

He persisted. "What are you doing, Bronwyn? How are you going to get me out of here? When? I'm hungry." The last delivered in a plaintive tone that was particularly irritating.

"I'm working on it," I lied.

He wasn't buying it. "No, you're not. I don't believe you. You're just fooling around while I'm going to pot in here. Starving to death! Why you hav..."

"Good night, Lance," I told him coolly, blocking his card face up to Corwin's. That ought to shut him up. I cut them back into the deck, face to face, and considered another Trump. Harlan. Might as well get back into the thick of things...

"What? Who is it?" He jumped as the contact touched him. (Geez, you should know. It's your Trump.) I was beginning to understand these things a little better, and I realized there was absolutely no reason why a Trump contact should startle the First Assistant Trump Master of the Realm. It was just Harlan's way...

"It's me," I told him, quite unnecessarily now that visual contact had been made. He peered at me suspiciously. "Can you bring me through? Where are you?" I added, just in case he was in the bathroom or something. Come to think of it, his surroundings, or what I could see of them, looked kind of white and sanitary...

"Well, O.K. We're in the infirmary. Kelcey's really bad." He reached out a hand and drew me forward. I had saved myself about a five minute walk.

"Anyone call Gérard?" I asked, and he nodded, staring at something or someone over my shoulder.

Beside him, Godfrey murmured, "I think we can take him."

Oh, great. Harlan looked doubtful. Actually he can 'take' just about anyone he pleases, but you'll never convince him of that.

I turned, and wondered why Godfrey was worried about dealing with

what looked like one of Julian's archers, rather nattily dressed and weaponless, standing in a casual pose with one foot on the sideboard of the bed where they had put Kelcey. He looked affable and anything but threatening...

Kayen stood at the other side of the bed, not looking like he was worried about anything besides his sister. In addition to Godfrey and Harlan, that left Eleanor peering at us from the corner and Herdan in the doorway, examining the scene through the inevitable gadget.

The stranger frowned. He seemed worried about something. Kelcey, I figured, because he was watching her intently as she moaned and twisted in the bed. She seemed to be in a great deal of pain. It didn't look like the meal had done her much good.

"Has she been doing a lot of shape-shifting?"

Kayen nodded, and Kelcey wailed, "I had to!"

The man's frown deepened. He shook his head ruefully. "Well, that explains it..."

I supposed he must be some medical expert Gérard had called in to deal with Kelcey's mysterious illness, and relaxed.

"What do you mean?" Kayen asked him.

"I'm not really sure why it happens, but it's common in the Courts," the stranger explained. "Sometimes when a shape shifter overuses the power, well, some kind of reaction sets in. Ordinary shape shift cells get eaten up, replaced by Primal Chaos."

"What?" Kayen and Kelcey yelled in duet.

"Are you a doctor?" Godfrey demanded suspiciously.

"No," he laughed. "But I've heard of this..."

"But you can't be sure," Godfrey insisted.

The guy gave him a take-it-or-leave-it shrug. "That's what it looks like to me," he answered.

Kelcey started to snivel, and Kayen bent over her solicitously. Right or wrong, it was a chilling prospect. Primal Chaos, for heaven's sake. I thought it over for a minute, and decided I was lucky just to be dealing with Abyss!

"You haven't explained what you're doing here," Godfrey persisted. "What gives you the right to come in here like you own the place, and start suggesting things like that! I think you owe us a little more of an explanation than your name is Jayson (or so you say) and you come from the Courts of Chaos."

He looked to Harlan for support, and Harlan nodded hastily.

"You guys have a job around here, or do you just harass people?" the stranger shot back at them.

"What am I going to do?" Kelcey wailed. "Help me!"

"I'm really not sure," Jayson-from-the-Courts-of-Chaos turned back to her and said, kindly enough. "At home, we have people who deal with it. Here?" He let it trail off, but I knew what he meant. I had never heard of

anything like this before. From the looks on their faces, neither had anyone else.

Godfrey still wasn't happy with the prospect of the Kaos Kid in our midst, and kept demanding that Jayson explain what he was doing in Amber. Jayson ignored him for awhile, talking with Kayen and Kelcey about the weird disease. Nothing of what he was saying seemed very reassuring. Apparently, the condition usually progressed until all of the body cells were replaced with Primal Chaos. From what Jayson was saying, I got the idea that it killed Chaos Lords so afflicted. What it would do to an Amberite was anybody's guess, but the prospects didn't look too good.

Since he couldn't bait Jayson, Godfrey turned his tactics to me. He sidled up, leered, and said, "Hey, looking good, Bronwyn... You been working out or something?"

I seriously considered hitting him. The new body wanted to, and it took every ounce of my own psychic control to overcome this reaction. Deliberately, I pried my fingernails from my clenched palms and told him to be quiet as nicely as I could manage. He subsided with a snicker. Maddening!

Then Gérard came in.

He didn't seem any happier to see us in the infirmary than he had been to see us in his rooms. At least this time I wasn't the focus of his attentions.

He took one look at Kelcey's worsened condition, and immediately reached for the collection of torture instruments that pass for medical diagnostics, and set about taking blood samples and the like. Kayen and Jayson were trying desperately to explain what might be going on, and Godfrey jumped in to point out that the whole idea was suspect because we couldn't be sure that Jayson, self-proclaimed Chaos Lord, was telling the truth.

Gérard paused, remembering to shake the vial of blood he was holding, staring at Jayson in a way that must have convinced him that, this time at least, he'd better come up with a good reason for being here.

"I'm supposed to assay the Logrus in a couple of days," Jayson told us. "My mentor suggested that, since I have a mixed heritage..." he paused, looking at the rest of us as though we should know something about this, "...I should take a trip to Amber to see how the other half lives, and then make an informed decision about what I wanted to do."

He seemed to be staring at Gérard's feet, which are awfully big, it's true, but not that extraordinary. Maybe Chaos Lords all have small feet...

Gérard grunted, apparently satisfied. I wondered at that. It's not like Chaos Lords show up every day to study us.

The 'there,-take-that' look was fading from Godfrey's face, replaced by anger.

"Well, you could have explained!"

Jayson gave him a look as if to say, who the dickens are you, and turned back to Kelcey, who had begun to cry again.

Miffed, Godfrey drew Harlan aside and began mumbling.

Gérard didn't seem to put too much stock in the Primal Chaos theory, but I could tell that Kayen and Kelcey were hot on it. When Herdan confirmed that he could detect its presence through his little gadget I wished, not for the first time, that I had my old command of the Pattern back. Maybe there was some way we could force the stuff out of Kelcey's cells. But I couldn't even sense it was there, and that bothered me.

Gérard seemed at a loss for a plan of action that would deal with this situation, and took his blood samples into the other room, doing with them... whatever it is you do with blood samples. When he came back, he asked Jayson if he knew anyone in the Courts who might be willing to come here and discuss the problem. Jayson looked skeptical. Apparently the spirit of detente does not include house calls.

Then Jayson suggested taking Kelcey to the Courts of Chaos for a consultation. He didn't invite Gérard to come along, and I could see my uncle was not too keen on the idea.

Gérard did what he could to reassure the hysterical Kelcey, and left to discuss the problem with Random or someone, presumably, who might be able to shed some light on the subject.

We were left with a dangerous problem and no answers.

It occurred to me that maybe something could be done with the Jewel of Judgment to force the Chaos out of Kelcey's cells. Herdan's Pattern engine was able to detect it, and from what I understood, probably erroneous, the engine was sort of a mini-Jewel that harnessed Pattern energy and focused it on... whatever Herdan wanted to effect.

We had kicked around a few ideas, but no one had come up with anything better... Godfrey had suggested calling Dworkin, for heaven's sake! Even Harlan didn't seem too enthusiastic about that one.

Kelcey wanted to go to Chaos, and asked Kayen and Jayson to take her there. We were all a little iffy on that one. It seemed like a dangerous place for a couple of Amberites, especially when one was sick and unable to defend herself. Finally we got around to the Pattern engine idea.

"What's in it for me?" Herdan wanted to know. "What's it worth to you?"

My respect for him dropped a few points, but I can't say I was surprised. It seemed like a typical attitude. If I'd ever had any doubts that these people from Corwin's universe were related to us, that cured it.

Kayen's reaction was predictably belligerent. Jayson looked disgusted. Eleanor and Harlan looked shocked. Godfrey, of course, hit the roof!

"That does it!" he yelled. "She's dying, and all you can think of is yourself. Harlan! You're just going to have to call Dworkin now!"

"I am?" Harlan asked, looking surprised. "Why me?"

"Because you know him!" Godfrey insisted, as if that was proof of anything. "He's *your* father."

What a fate!

Of course, this made me look at Harlan in a whole new light. I remembered how he had been defending Dworkin to me, was it just a day or so ago? Assuring me that he was really a good guy, completely cooperative. Now I knew why. I had the feeling, though, that he wasn't too keen on having the exact nature of their relationship a matter of public record.

Hmm, I thought, not a little awed by the prospect, that makes him Oberon's brother, probably 'half', and my great uncle or something like...

I wondered if that meant he outranked people like Benedict or Dad, but I figured if it did, he wouldn't be hanging around with us. He'd be off somewhere hobnobbing with Random.

Still, it explained a lot. His skill with Trumps for one thing, and that powerful mind for another. What it didn't explain was why he hung around taking orders from people like Godfrey, who always pushes him around. Like now.

"Well?" Godfrey glared.

Harlan studied him, narrow-eyed and speculative. I thought for a moment that he was going to refuse outright. Couldn't say I blamed him.

Godfrey stood firm, arms folded across his chest. I hoped Harlan would stick to his guns this time. Dworkin was the last person I could imagine helping us at a time like this.

Then Kelcey wailed, "You *hate* me. You *want* me to die!"

"Yeah," he muttered, fanning the deck. "That's me. I'm Satan..."

He drew two Trumps from his collection, palming one in his off hand and holding the other, presumably Dworkin, in front of his eyes. Frowning, he concentrated...

Oh boy, I thought, now we're in for it! I quickly interposed a bed and a few bodies between me and Harlan. I shouldn't have bothered. That's not where it popped through.

No contact and request for assistance here! A *thing* just popped into our midst, claws scrambling for purchase on the linoleum floor as it twisted this way and that, surveying us all while its tail twitched in anger or delight or something... I don't know what. Scared the daylight out of ME!

Whaaat do you want?" it hissed, raking us all with steely eyes. An ugly purplish tongue flicked out as though it was tasting the air.

"Dad..." Harlan was tentative.

Yessssss, *What do you want?*"

Boy, was I glad I didn't have to answer that one!

Before Harlan could explain, Eleanor panicked and did something stupid. Not that I blamed her. If I'd had a weapon, I'd probably have done the same...

She whipped a dart out of her sleeve and pinked the thing!

Bad move! It was on her in a flash. Before any of us could react, it had sprung and pinned her against the wall, claws locked lightly over the back of her neck. I tried to think of something useful to do. Ha!

"Now, Dad..." Harlan began in placating tones.

It snaked its head around to regard him, red eyed and hideous. I think it was drooling. Some greenish ichor, maybe its blood, dripped from the dart wound on its tail. Eleanor was whimpering.

"Don't hurt me. I'm sorry. I'll clean it up. I promise..."

I was dimly conscious of Jayson muttering something about 'forbidden forms'...I could understand why.

Harlan had begun to move, and I gave him a lot of credit for that, because he was moving towards this monster that was apparently Dworkin. I don't know, maybe the old guy looks like that every time he has a few too many. My own Dad was beginning to look pretty good to me...

"Now, Dad," Harlan was saying softly, persuasively, "why don't you let her go... she didn't mean to hurt you... you frightened her."

His voice never quavered. Maybe he's used to this. I would have been mewling in fear.

The creature lifted her by the neck and regarded her in a manner which I personally would not care to have directed at myself.

Yessssss..." it hissed. "I want her..."

Noooo," Eleanor whimpered. It ignored her. I swear it was salivating, but somehow, I didn't think it had lunch on its mind.

"No, Dad," Harlan said firmly. How could he keep calling it that? "We need your help," he continued calmly. "Now, put her down, please..."

"Please! I'm sorry! I didn't mean it! I'll fix your tail!" Eleanor was babbling.

It responded with something like a cross between a chuckle and a snarl.

Harlan wasn't daunted. He took another measured step towards it. I noticed that Godfrey made no move to follow him.

He had apparently moved too close for the monster's comfort, because it half twisted in his direction, hauling Eleanor with it, squealing in horror. It snarled at Harlan, wisps of smoke streaming from its nostrils.

Harlan stopped short, deciding not to bank on the filial relationship, I supposed. I gave him a mental round of applause. As far as I was concerned, he had already extended himself way beyond the call of duty.

He wasn't finished yet.

"Dad," he repeated urgently, "you've got to put her down and help us."

"Please!" Eleanor begged. "Let me fix it..."

Surprisingly, it did. It put her down.

Now that there was no chance of losing them both, I took a gamble and opened a conduit to the Abyss, hoping to ditch the thing in the only way I could manage.

I guess I must have been a little off my game that day. For the second time in a row, the power failed me. The darned thing just didn't fall! It hovered there as though the floor was still solid beneath it. Frustrated, I let the conduit collapse.

Nobody seemed to notice...

Eleanor skittered to the monster's rear and pulled out the dart.

apologizing profusely for the inconvenience and other inanities. Then, amazingly, she whipped a handkerchief out of her reticule and began dabbing at the wound with little ineffective motions, managing to sop up a little of the stuff that was still leaking from the gash. Her handkerchief began to smoke a bit, and disintegrated in mid-swipe. She stared at the shredded bit of linen for a moment, and then cast it into a wastebasket, where it continued to smolder for awhile.

The monster watched her, eyes a-glitter.

"Now..." it hissed. "You will come with me..."

"Me!" Eleanor squeaked. "I said I was sorry!" Her voice rose again to a hysterical pitch, and I knew we weren't out of the soup yet.

"I want you!"

She began sidling away against the wall, toward the door. In a flash it was on her again, and she screamed.

"Dad!"

It whirled in Harlan's direction, snarling in rage. He flinched, understandably, but stood his ground, almost toe to toe with the beast.

"Dad, please, wait! We need your help for something else. Listen to me, please!"

Give it up, Harlan!

He didn't.

"Uh, could you... uh..."

Oh boy, I thought, don't lose it now, buddy, or we're in big trouble. He seemed less sure of himself, now that he had the beast's undivided attention.

"Uh... could you, um... take a look at Kelcey over here? Uh, she's got a little problem..."

Little problem!

Kelcey made a little restless move on the bed, and the monster's eyes flicked in her direction. I swear it drooled again.

"Please..." she murmured, and Kayen started suddenly, shifting his axe in his hand. Jayson slowly removed his foot from the bed, not quite tensing, but obviously alert for something. He straightened, hand moving toward a dagger at his belt I hadn't noticed before.

"What...?" The beast moved slowly, deliberately toward the bed. Eleanor hid behind Herdan, who was studying the whole scene through his Pattern gizmo. I wondered what in the world he was seeing that we weren't.

"Dad, Kelcey's sick..." Harlan explained quickly. "They say she has Primal Chaos eating up her cells... uh... because she shape shifts, you know..." He was beginning to sound apologetic, and I was concerned. This was no time to lose control of the situation.

"I seeeee," it hissed. It sounded delighted, staring at Kelcey as if contemplating today's blue-plate special.

"Yeah, well, we thought maybe you could make her well. You know, figure out what we can do for her. If you don't help us, she could die," he rushed on, and Kelcey cooperated with a well-placed snivel.

The monster sniffed the bed and licked its massive chops. This, I reasoned, does not bode well.

"Please..." she whispered plaintively. "Help me. I'm dying."

Touching, no?

The beast was moved. I could tell by the way it salivated.

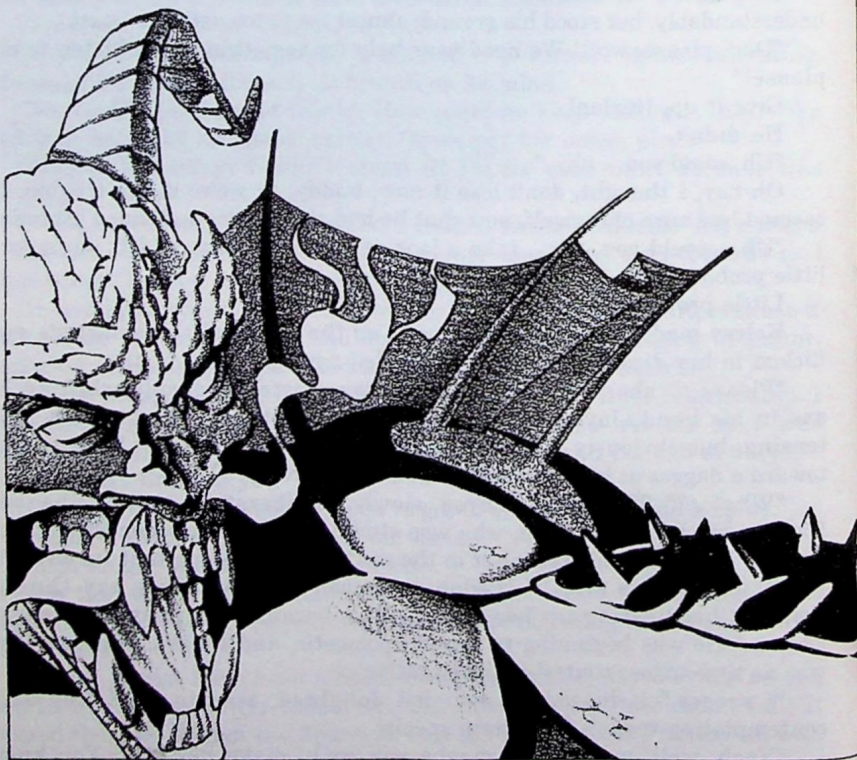
"What do you want?" Great drops of drool fell from its jaws and sizzled on the floor.

"Make me well. Can you?"

It roared with delighted mirth.

"What will you give me?"

"What?" A startled gasp from Kayen.



"I'll do anything! Harlan, tell him!" Kelcey wailed, and her brother made a restraining motion that she shrugged away as the beast growled its displeasure.

"What is it that you want, Dad?" Harlan asked carefully.

"Her."

"Uh, what do you want with her?" he rephrased.

The monster threw back its head and howled. *"I will take... her!"*

Oh shoot, take her where?

"Dad, I don't think we can agree to..."

Kelcey cut him off.

"Tell him," she said deliberately, "tell him I'll do anything he asks..."



Kayen was shaking his head, but there was a strength in her voice that hadn't been there a while ago. She can be really stubborn when she gets an idea into her head.

"Uh, Kelcey," Harlan tried to warn her, "I'd be real careful if I were you..."

"I mean it, Harlan!"

The thing that was Dworkin just snarled.

"What do you want her for?" Kayen demanded.

I swear I saw it smirk.

"No, Dad!"

Kelcey wailed in frustration as the thing turned to Harlan again, fire in its eyes.

"She will be mine," it insisted. "She has agreed. I want her..."

Harlan shook his head. I saw he still gripped the second Trump in his other hand.

"Please," Kelcey begged, oblivious to the danger she was in.

Harlan ignored her. "Forget it, Dad. You don't really want HER. She's puny and sick. She wouldn't be any use to you..."

"No!" Kelcey screamed, writhing on the bed. "I told you I'd do anything!"

Now I thought I had an inkling of what Dworkin really wanted her for, and I knew she had to be off her rocker at this point to agree to that. I held my breath as Harlan wheedled.

"Believe me, Dad. You don't want her. Hey, I have an idea. Let's go somewhere... just you and me..."

Kelcey was struggling to rise.

"Come on, Dad."

The monster regarded him suspiciously. "Go. You want to go?" it asked slyly.

"Yeah," Harlan gasped in relief, beginning to raise the arm that held the spare Trump.

"So be it," the monster pronounced, and suddenly the two of them disappeared. Not even a puff of smoke to mark their passing.

Kelcey scrambled to the edge of the bed, crying and cursing Harlan for being every kind of creep and traitor she could think of. She didn't even seem to notice that he had probably just saved what was left of her life...

Now I was worried. Good and worried! Seems like whenever we get into a power play with something tough and terrible, the first thing they do is neutralize Harlan! Doesn't anybody see this but me?"

Now maybe he leaned into this one, but seriously, it doesn't take genius to tell who our assorted enemies perceive as the real threat in our group. But then, (except for him and me) we're a little short on genius in the first place.

I looked up and noticed Random peering into the room over Eleanor's shoulder, as she in turn peered around Herdan. Now I can't blame Eleanor for her reaction, all things considered, but it occurred to me that Random

(being the King and all) just might have asserted himself a little bit during our confrontation... sent us some reinforcements... something!

He just nodded in a 'carry-on' manner and ducked back into the hall again, where other unidentified observers had apparently gathered. I thought I heard Fiona's dulcet tones in the background, and seethed. She certainly had the power to have done something. I know for a fact that she and Dworkin are as thick as thieves. But no, they just stood in the hall and let the thing take Harlan. All that power!

"Damn," I muttered under my breath. You have to understand how angry I was.

I caught a glimpse of other faces in the hall... faces I didn't recognize... and I wondered about all the strangers who were suddenly running around the palace without so much as a by-your-leave. Or maybe they had one from Random, but lately... well... we were tripping over people from Corwin's pattern, stray Chaos Lords, heaven only knew what else would be wandering in. It's tough enough to tell friend from foe when it's only the family...

Herdan seemed to recognize the new face at the door. They conferred for a time, Herdan gesticulating with his gizmo and the new guy waving a thick deck of Trumps. I wasn't close enough to get the gist of it, and wasn't inclined to give them the satisfaction of thinking I cared. By comparison, the Kaos Kid was beginning to look, well... wholesome.

Perspective! I couldn't figure it out. Without my Pattern to define how I see my fellow beings, I couldn't find anything to recommend the creatures of an alien pattern over a Chaos Lord. He, at least, had shown some human concern for Kelcey's plight. He hadn't asked 'what's in it for me' even if the idea of taking Kelcey to the Courts did seem a bit crackbrained. Herdan, on the other hand, looked as if he was studying our species for some kind of scientific report.

Pattern to pattern his aspect might have seemed more familiar, akin to my own. It wasn't, but of course, I had little to compare except my memories, which seemed to be slipping farther from my grasp as the moments wore on. I decided that it was the Abyss whispering this nonsense to my subconscious.

Then Kelcey called me, so I pushed the problem from my mind and went over to the bed to see what she wanted.

I hadn't heard much from this corner since the two men had gotten her calmed down after Harlan and Dworkin disappeared. They had been talking rather quietly. The circles around her eyes made her look owlish, familiar and pathetic... you know... like a chick that isn't going to make it.

Didn't look like she would...

I steeled myself not to feel sorry for her.

She reached out and grabbed my hand in an iron grip, and I tried not to wince. Her voice was a rasping croak, eyes bright and feverish.

"Listen to me," she began. I had a quick impulse to pull my hand away

and run from the room. I knew there was some task she wanted me to perform, and I hate that!

"What?" No, really, I was trying to be cordial...

She drew me closer. She had more strength than was readily apparent.

"Bronwyn, I have to go to the Courts of Chaos. It's my only chance."

I considered the options.

"Uh-huh," I said helpfully.

That concluded, she nodded as if I'd agreed to something.

"But you've got to promise me something, two things actually."

"I do? I mean, of course..." I'm big on the last requests of the dying. I really hoped she just wanted me to compose her epitaph, or a certain kind of flowers or something...

"First, there's something weird going on, I'm not sure what, but..." She dropped her voice, and I had to lean closer to hear. "After the fiasco at the Grove, I went back to the Abyss and rescued Deirdre... Caine helped... or maybe I helped him... I'm not sure..."

Now, this was news to me.

"Caine stayed behind to make sure that Brand was really dead. I knew I had to get Deirdre out of there, she was acting very strangely."

There was a strange gleam in Kelcey's eyes. At first, I put it off to fever, but as she went on I realized I recognized that gleam... from my own mirror! What did we share, this dark little woman and I? Death. The thought was chilling...

Her fingers bit into my wrist.

"I Trumped back to the Grove, but all of you had left by then. Deirdre was acting very weird. I wasn't quite sure what to do. Then I got a Trump call. I thought it was Caine, so I answered. Dumb! It wasn't. It was your father."

"Bleys?" I said stupidly, although he's the only father I've got...

She nodded and continued, "Never again will I answer one of those things! He got a great big grin on his face, stuck his sword into the ground, and picked up Deirdre. I tried to protest, but he just brushed me off... said he'd tell my father what a good job I'd done, and I could just go home now and forget about it."

She paused. I could tell by the look on her face that she was still fuming about Dad's high-handed treatment. I knew just what she meant.

"He Trumped away, but I followed."

I wondered how she'd managed that, but she didn't explain.

"He took her to a room somewhere. I didn't recognize it. There was someone else there, a red-headed woman I've never seen before. She took one look at me and blipped me somewhere."

"Blipped?"

"Yeah. Like a Trump..."

"Not Fiona?"

"I told you. No one I know!"

"When I got back to Amber, everything was topsy-turvy. You had just

tried to kill yourself, and everyone was all upset about it. I tried to tell them what was going on, but as usual, no one would listen...

"Later I went down to the kitchens to get something to eat. I was feeling weak again, and Kayen's body-building stuff was too gross..."

Some Amberites do their best thinking with fork in hand...

"Then Julian came in. I started filling him in about what had happened... he'd been in the Arden, I guess, and was a little out of touch. When I got to the part about your father taking Deirdre, he got a weird look on his face and rushed out. I didn't like the look of it, one bit."

I digested this particular item, wondering what it could mean. Dad and Julian aren't really thick, you see. Some old business that dates back to the interregnum...

"I felt that someone else ought to know about it, so I went to Random and told the whole story to him. He freaked out on me... I mean, completely... and went rushing off, himself..."

I had no idea what that could mean. Random hasn't struck me as being real effective lately...

"After that, I tried to get in touch with father. I tried his Trump several times, but he wouldn't or couldn't answer. I got scared and figured that maybe he was missing or a prisoner somehow, so I went off to look for him..."

Dumb, I thought. You should have called Kayen.

"Finally, you found me with Abyss and dragged me through to Amber."

I had a feeling there was more to the tale, but this was all she was willing to tell. She didn't explain where she was when I found her, or why she couldn't get back by herself. I decided to try another line of questioning.

"This woman who blipped you, what did she use? Was it a Trump?" I questioned carefully.

"It was like a Trump," she said.

"Like a Trump. Was there... uh... one of those crazy rainbow effects?"

Nooooo. I don't think so... I don't know..."

The germ of an idea was beginning to creep into the back of my skull. Now, most of the others aren't too clear on what I can and can't do (when I am myself, I mean) and they don't look too closely when I produce effects similar to things they can accomplish on their own. I had a feeling I knew what she meant by 'like a Trump', but I wasn't about to explain...

"Did you feel anything peculiar... like a rush of... um... energy?"

"*I felt like I was dyyyyying!*" she wailed, and we were off and running again. This time it took all three of us to calm her down. I had to promise to look into the matter if 'something happened to her' before she would settle down and drink the water Kayen was spilling all over us...

"That's my other problem," she told me in a stage whisper as Kayen returned the cup to the bedside stand. "I'm going to the Courts with Jayson. He thinks he knows a doctor there who can help me."

"You told me that already," I replied, mind still locked on the

mysterious red-head.

My particular talents don't breed rampant in Amber, which some people think is good. If there was another Pattern Initiate in our midst, she'd done a good job of keeping herself out of sight. Dad's or Fiona's or... good heavens!

"Huh," I gasped, only partly in tune to the jerk she gave to my wrist.

"Then you'll do it?"

"Sure!" She'd been speaking again, and I hated to admit that I hadn't been listening.

With that, she gave the Kaos Kid some kind of sign, and he scooped her up from the bed and contacted some Trump I hadn't noticed he was holding. Kayen leaped towards them, one hand reaching for his sister, who screamed, "Stop him, Bronwyn! You promised!"

Lords! Was that what I promised?

Dutifully, I grabbed him by the leg and tried to move him away from them. I figured my Abyss strength should count for something...

Ha! I might just as well have been trying to move Kolvir!

Well, at least now I knew my limitations. Random, I could take. Kayen... uh-uh.

We scuffled back and forth for a ludicrous moment, me holding onto Kayen's leg and he trying to swat me away. I was flip-flopping around like a fish on a stringer.

Finally, Jayson abandoned his efforts. Kayen stepped back, and I fell to the floor with a bone-jarring thud.

Godfrey, Herdan, and Eleanor were staring at us as if we'd gone insane. Maybe we had.

I quickly regained my feet, trying not to let anyone see me rubbing my derriere...

Herdan seemed to reach some sort of decision then. He stepped forward with a sigh.

"Let me give it a try," he offered in grudging tones.

Jayson seemed reluctant to relinquish his burden. Kayen nodded to him, and he set her back down.

"If it doesn't work..." he murmured.

"Then we go to Chaos," Kayen asserted.

I decided that was fine with me.

"Give me some room, please," Herdan ordered.

We stepped away from the bed. Herdan focussed the engine and concentrated. I realized then that he was an Initiate himself, although the almost palpable bolt of energy he sent in Kelcey's direction seemed, well... wrong... somehow.

But how could that be?

The Abyss again, no doubt, was... No!

Kelcey screamed! One horrible, wailing scream that outclassed all of her earlier invective. Suddenly a part of her midsection exploded, spewing

blood and a blue-white light all over the place.

Eleanor's scream echoed Kelcey's, and Godfrey was yelling for Herdan to stop at the top of his lungs.

Kayen made a convulsive move towards his axe, and I was pretty sure he meant to use it. Still, Herdan focussed the engine and concentrated as another sickening pop sent blood and guts all over us. I dodged away, bringing me closer to Herdan, who moved slightly to clear his line of vision.

"You're killing her!" Kayen roared, and still the stream of energy went on.

Herdan is nowhere near as big as Kayen. I dove across the floor, tackling him right above the knees. They buckled, and he went down.

"Get her out of here! Jayson! Move it!"

He already had the Trump in his hand.

As Herdan and I rolled on the floor grappling for the engine, the three of them disappeared in a rainbow shimmer. I hoped she'd find her death with dignity, there in the Courts, at least.

My tussle with Herdan had left me, once again, in a very undignified position. While it hadn't been necessary to employ any of the tactics which (my father assures me) are perfectly appropriate for a lady defending her virtue, I was sort of sprawled on top of him, holding his wrist against the floor so he couldn't reach the pattern engine I had knocked out of his grasp.

The gizmo seemed pretty innocuous now that he wasn't able to focus it any more, and besides, Kelcey and Kayen and the Kaos Kid were safely (?) on their way to the Courts by now. I figured I should probably let him up.

He was pretty mad. I didn't think he'd have the nerve to hit me, not with Godfrey and Eleanor for witnesses, so I rolled off of him to the left and let go of his arm. He sat up looking thick as mud, flexed his wrist and reached for the engine.

If he turns it on me, I thought, I'm out of here! He didn't. He tapped it once or twice, I guess to make sure it wasn't damaged, then turned a baleful stare in my direction.

"You fool!" he accused. *"It was working!"*

Yeah, right!

"Now wait just a minute," Godfrey began as I got to my feet. I thought he sounded a little less belligerent than usual, now that his only backup consisted of a couple of girls. He lacked Harlan's quiet threat and Kayen's axe for support now, and seemed to inclined to try reasoning this out with the Pattern Master.

"You were killing her," I broke in in flat tones before we could lose our offensive momentum.

That did the trick.

"She's right!" Godfrey stated, more forcefully now. *"Why the devil didn't you stop when you saw the effect it was having? I mean, what were we supposed to do?"*

I had refrained from reminding him that we hadn't done anything, I had. We had a nice united front going, which is a rarity when any more than two of us are gathered in one place. No sense spoiling that.

Eleanor murmured, "Yeah!" and shifted the reticule at her wrist as if testing the weight of it, oh, say... against somebody's head.

Herdan looked from one to the other of us in turn with something like a sneer.

"It was working!" he insisted. "It was forcing the Primal Chaos from her cells."

"And a lot of other stuff besides," Godfrey informed him in case he hadn't noticed. "Blood, bone, and tissue."

Herdan just shrugged, as if he wasn't convinced that would matter too much in the long run. I didn't think Kelcey was going to make it either, but I wasn't anxious to see the process hastened in so bloody a manner. But it was pretty useless, trying to argue with Herdan. He just looked at us as though we were some interesting laboratory specimens that had suddenly run amok, and reminded us that, after all, we had asked him to do it. He hadn't volunteered.

Well, that was true enough.

I wound up telling him I hoped he hadn't been hurt when I decked him, and he assured me in a tight voice that of course he was fine. What he didn't assure me of was that there'd be no hard feelings over the matter. That was no surprise. I've always found that wounded dignity hurts a lot worse than the stuff that only bleeds. I figured he'd plot revenge. I probably would, in his shoes.

But there were no threats or maledictions. He put the engine back into his pocket, and took himself off to look for someone he called Jeremi. This, I presumed, was the brother with the hefty Trump deck.

Godfrey was getting antsy about Harlan, but after several unsuccessful tries with his Trump he went off to pursue some other search options he though might be helpful. He didn't elaborate, and I thought... rather uncharitably, I suppose... that he planned to enlist somebody a little more powerful than Eleanor and me to help him.

When he left us, I sat down on Kelcey's bed to think. It was still warm. Everything had happened so quickly. I was reminded of the promises I'd made to her, only half believing I was going to have to make good on them. "If anything happens to me..."

Well, something had. If the Chaos didn't kill her, I was pretty sure that having a couple of holes blown in her torso was probably going to finish her off. I couldn't see what any doctor... not even one from the Courts... was going to be able to do about that. Problem is, we're supposed to be, well, darn near immortal. Fact: I had tried very hard to kill myself this morning. Fact: I was still walking around, under my own steam and not too much the worse for wear. I even had my arm back... of sorts. But Kelcey's illness had forced me to face the shadow of my own mortality, and I was badly shaken.

If could happen. It really could.

I looked at Eleanor sideways, hoping she wouldn't notice that I was... well, scared. She was looking at me sideways, probably thinking much of the same. We shared a weak grin. I realized my palms were sweating. I took a deep breath to steady myself. I found myself wondering if a drink would help. Probably not...

I stood.

"Where are you going?" The question too casually put.

"Something I've got to do," I replied, noncommittal.

She wouldn't leave it alone. "What?" she wanted to know.

"I... kind of promised Kelcey I'd look into a few matters for her... ah, you know... take care of a few things till she's back on her feet."

She managed a smile at the lie.

"What?" she repeated.

Briefly, I explained about Deirdre and Dad and Julian and the red-headed woman, and how I'd promised to try to find out what was going on and make sure that nothing evil was afoot. As I talked, I got the feeling I might have bitten off a little more than I was prepared to chew.

When I had finished she stood looking at me for a few moments, then nodded absently, as though she had come to some private conclusion.

"Mind if I tag along?"

She never stops surprising me. Just when I think I have her figured... I wonder if all of that shrinking and hiding behind other people (usually big, strong male types) is just an act?

"Why would you want to do that?" I asked her. After all, this wasn't a walk in the gardens...

She shrugged. "Why not? I haven't anything better, right now, do I? It might be interesting or helpful or something, and besides," she grinned, "you promised me dinner at your place when this is over. I want to make sure you're around to deliver. As I remember, you were bragging about your cook..."

I had to grin back. If there was an ulterior motive anywhere, it was beyond me...

"You any good with Pattern?" I asked her.

I lost my own power so soon after I met her that I hadn't really had time to assess her strengths. I knew she had extricated herself from a sticky situation in the Abyss, but I had no idea how she'd managed it. It could be important.

She grimaced.

"I'm a lot better with this." She indicated the sword at her hip, where it hung incongruously against the lace of her tea dress.

My turn to make a face.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," I told her.

She shrugged. "So, where do we start?"

"With my father, I think," I told her. "There are a couple of other

options, but that might be the key. Kelcey said he offered to take Deirdre back to Amber for her. Maybe I can get him to tell me what he did with her. I don't think he's here. He would have put in some kind of appearance by now, especially with all this craziness going on..."

"You think maybe Fiona would know?" she suggested.

I crinkled my nose.

"Maybe. You want to go ask her?"

She didn't.

"So... how are you going to go about it? Do you think he'll tell you anything?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. We... well, we don't get along very well. There's a chance I can goad him into a slip, though. Particularly if I can make him think I don't think he contributed much help for the problems we've been having. he's got a lot of... pride. He really thinks Amber can't get along without him..."

She looked doubtful. "That doesn't seem like much of a plan. What if he doesn't fall for it?"

"Then I'll have to think of something else," I shot back at her, and she nodded.

"O.K., how do we find him?"

"Good question. I guess I'll try the obvious first..." I dug in my pocket for my Trump deck. I didn't really think it would work, I confess. If Dad had decided to drop out of sight, I figured he could find a way to block Trump calls. I wished Harlan were around to help me punch through whatever blocks my father had probably set.

I concentrated. At first, there was that black, empty feeling I had expected. Just for the heck of it, I pushed a little harder, not really expecting a response. When it came, I was so shocked I barely had time to call out before I went tumbling through the rainbow.

I landed on my knees on a bare wooden floor. A hand, twisted into the back of my shirt, told me that Eleanor had reacted a lot more quickly than I had. Good thing.

"You O.K.?" she asked, and I grunted something like a 'yes'.

I had never seen this place before.

I know my father has more secrets than I could possibly count. While I was growing up he was always away... somewhere... doing... something and never, ever around when I needed him most. It always burned. Whenever he was home we usually wound up in some kind of argument, so I never questioned him too closely about where he went or what he did when he wasn't around for those long periods of time. I always wondered how and why my mother stood for it.

I never asked him anything that could have indicated that I was curious, or even cared about what he did when he went away. That would have been an admission that his absences wounded me, that I needed him or

something. It would have given him yet another power over me: the ability to hurt by leaving me alone.

Looking back, I know it really didn't matter. He went anyway, and never bothered to think about what I might be thinking or feeling while he was gone. That hurt too.

Apparently, this was one of his hide-outs. A tall tower overlooking a vast grassy plain, with some mountains off in the distance, too far to see if they were anything I might recognize. The tower was glassed in on all four sides, but each had pretty much the same panorama. The room was bare and unpainted. There was one trap door leading down, but none above. I surmised we were on the top floor.

The room was pleasantly warm, with no visible heating arrangements. Its only furnishing was a wooden bedstead of no particular pedigree, sheeted in white. My father lay upon it, dressed only in a loin-cloth. His eyes were open, staring at the ceiling. He was sweating profusely.

I didn't think he was aware of our presence.

Softly, beside me, Eleanor whistled.

I nodded, agreeing to whatever, and moved toward the bed.

"Do you think he can see us?" she whispered, sounding as though she wasn't crazy about the idea.

I shook my head. Boy, he sure looked spooky!

Slowly, I passed my hand across his line of vision. There was no reaction. I heard Eleanor's sigh of relief and mentally agreed.

Now I stood there pondering what I should do next. So I had found my father. Fat lot of good it was doing me. I promised myself to ask Harlan, provided I ever saw him again, how I made the Trump contact work without my father's conscious compliance. That didn't seem to fit, but I couldn't figure out why. I just don't know enough about Trump, I guess...

"What now?" Eleanor prompted.

"I don't know," I told her, "I've got to think about it."

I thought. No brilliant conclusions presented themselves.

Finally, because I didn't know what else to do, I reached out and touched him.

I knew immediately that I had made a big mistake.

Too late! I tried to resist the pull, but it was much stronger than I was. I felt myself falling, gripped in a hold I couldn't break, no matter how desperately I tried. I think I heard Eleanor shout something behind me. Too late!

What happened next is a little tough to explain, but I'll try. Everything I was feeling was going on on a purely psychic level, you understand. Sometimes it may seem that I saw or felt something physical, and I may describe it that way. In reality, I wasn't there. Only my mind... and *his*.

Lords of Light! My father is a powerhouse.

There was a strangle-hold around my mind, and I spent a few futile moments trying to break away. Ha!

He was annoyed by my intrusion. That much I could tell. But then, he always is. Too bad... It was no use. The more I wiggled, the harder he held on. I felt his outrage, and reacted... well, like I always do. Defensive. Abrasive. Our tempers flared in simultaneous fury. Not for nothing are we red-heads, after all.

For awhile, I don't know how long, we battled. True to form, we both reverted to type, throwing everything we'd always held against each other into the fray with reckless abandon. I hit him with my anger. I tried to undermine his hold with guilt. He reiterated with all the expectations he'd had for me that I had never even bothered to meet or even to consider. His disappointment at my lack of filial obedience... my lack of respect...

Yeah, we hauled out every dirty trick we could think of. My dad sure knows more dirty tricks than I do!

Finally, I subsided. No choice.

Once I stopped struggling he turned his attention away, back to what he was doing, ignoring me as usual. I took what felt like a deep breath, and tried to take stock of my surroundings. Where the dickens was I, anyway?

What I saw astounded me!

We hovered a little to the left and somewhere above the midpoint of an enormous stack of Patterns! I perceived the midpoint to be where my own Pattern (easily identified) was located in the stack, but I can't really be sure... the stack extended well above and below my line of vision, actually psychic sense, although there was a definite visual image in my mind!

I don't like to think I'm easily impressed, but this was boggling! I'd never seen anything like it before.

I have no idea how long I spent just gawking at the sight... could have been minutes or hours. Dad had turned his attention away from me as soon as he was satisfied that I had stopped fighting. His mind was concentrated on manipulating the flow of energy that reached from a Pattern-like source at the top of the stack to that which I recognized as the Primal Pattern of Amber. I couldn't tell if the power was being drawn along some kind of line or cable, or whether the umbilical connection I visualized was actually the stream of energy itself.

I considered the strong visual image. I knew that neither Dad nor myself were 'here' in a physical sense. I knew my body was elsewhere... back in the tower beside his own. But I could 'see' this place. How?

If you haven't learned to stretch your psychic senses, it might be difficult to understand how psychic sight differs from physical sight. It does.

Now, I am pretty good at this, and most of what I knew about these techniques, admittedly, I learned from Bleys. It was the only part of my education that he supervised personally.

He used to say: "Now, we can go over this in twelve easy lessons, or six hard ones."

Being the kind of person I am... well, you know...

I can't exactly remember when the headaches began... but after a time I

began to get them whenever I concentrated too long or too hard... and they do get really debilitating! At any rate, the situation usually deteriorated at a predictable rate, with Dad shouting and me crying... till he'd throw up his hands in rage and frustration and stomp off... leaving me to my mother, my maid, a darkened room, and the inevitable willow-bark tea. As soon as I recovered it would all begin again. It went on like this for years, until he was finally satisfied that I had learned all that I could. Sometimes I still get the headaches...

I know I'm not in Dad's class. Shoot! I'm not even close to Harlan's, but I thought I might have surprised my father just a bit this time. You see, I've grown some since the last time we'd locked horns...

Now he almost seemed unaware that I was picking through his mind, trying to find some clue to where we were. Maybe he just didn't care...

I was hard put to figure out whether he had transported us psychically to this place, or if it was a place at all. I knew it was possible, on his level of operation at least, to construct a locale out of his imagination and lend it visual imagery in order to better orient himself to what he was doing there. That made sense, but I really couldn't be sure. It looked pretty real to me!

I confess I forgot myself. Forgot a lot of things, come to think of it... Kelcey and Deirdre... and Eleanor, back at the tower, who was probably going nuts trying to figure out what had happened to me.

"Dad."

No answer.

"Daddy!"

Still no answer.

"Daddy, what are we doing!"

I pushed the question as hard as I could, putting all of my psychic strength behind it.

"Eh...?"

As I've said, I've grown some...

With something like surprise, he shifted his attention back to me with a suspicious scrutiny that almost made me wish I'd kept my big mind shut.

"What did you say?" Thought as cold and clipped as his voice.

"What are we doing?" I repeated, curiosity at war with fear.

A quick moment of speculation.

"What is this place?" I continued. "What's that, and what are we supposed to do with it?"

I indicated the stack, but his mind was whirling. He seemed hung up on something I had said. What? The word 'we'.

It seemed to confuse him.

"What does it look like?" he countered. A cover, I thought.

I gave a mental shrug. "Patterns... I suppose. But only one of them is right. Why are there so many? What are they good for? Are they real?"

He laughed then. Laughter is one of his best techniques, even on a psychic level. There is great charm in my father's mirth.

I thought he was going to brush me off.

"Patterns, yes! But they're all right, girl. For them. Only one is ours... As to what they're good for... suppose you tell me..."

That was always one of his favorite teaching ploys... to make me answer my own questions. I studied the stack again, trying to buy myself time to think. I hadn't a clue.

I noticed the ones directly above and below my own were almost identical to it. Moving outward in either direction, the slight variations became increasingly pronounced. Then major changes became evident, until finally at the periphery there was very little resemblance to my Pattern at all.

The pattern connected to my Pattern by the umbilical power line was one of the wild ones at the top, so apparently the variations in design didn't effect the quality of the energy.

I sensed him observing my analysis without overt criticism. That encouraged me to try a theory.

"Power," I told him. "You're shunting energy from the far pattern to ours. That's what the line is for."

"Ummmm." Apparently, he wanted more.

"And by studying the others, you can learn more about our own. How they're alike and how they differ, and what the relationships are."

"And vice-versa." He seemed satisfied. "Very good."

For a moment he was silent, and I thought I'd lost him again until I realized he was only engaged in making a minor correction to his power line. The difference was that now he was actually permitting me to see what he was doing. Before we spoke, he had kept his actions shielded from me in a way I could only see after the fact.

"Can I help?"

When I saw how the energy was manipulated it didn't seem hard to do, although I still couldn't figure out how he had managed to connect them in the first place.

"Why?"

"Because I can. And because I want to..."

So he let me.

Suddenly I realized that I could! I was touching Pattern, using it, for the first time since I fell into the Abyss. Lords! What if...

Panicked, I searched for some trace of the Abyss in myself. There was none, but in light of my track record I checked the Pattern and the line, desperately hoping that I hadn't managed to damage it. No. It looked all right...

But my control had slipped, and Dad reached out and took it away from me and stabilized the thing once more. I cringed, waiting for the string of invective I was sure had to come as a result of my messing things up.

Surprisingly, it didn't.

His regard was narrow, probing, but not hostile.

"You haven't asked me why I'm doing this."

The thought was casually put, but I felt it was important for me to answer this one as carefully as possible.

"I figured you'd tell me if you wanted me to know," I told him. "But I've got a guess..."

He waited...

"I think you're the only one who can," I astounded myself by saying, mainly because I realized that I believed it was true.

He chuckled.

"Well, maybe not the *only* one... but actually, I'm shunting power from the far pattern to strengthen our own..."

"Why? Is our Pattern weak?"

"It's weakened..."

I had a terrible thought, but he took it from my mind before it could do me in.

"No, nothing you did. That's been... corrected..."

I got the impression that he wasn't too enthusiastic about the correction, but I couldn't tell why, and he didn't explain.

"It's incredible!"

"It's necessary," he said simply.

"Dad, can you teach me how to do these things?"

"You want to learn this." A statement, not a question.

I just hung there gawping. Was he agreeing or being derisive?

"Yes! Of course I do!" I went on in a rush. "Lords, Daddy, touching this, having this... it's all I've ever wanted! Not the main thing... it's the only thing!"

I could almost hear the wheels turning in his head. The psychic pressure that pinned me there had never lessened, but there was something else as well. Approval? Hey, let's not get carried away here, Bronwyn, girl...

I waited expectantly. The next few minutes could make it or break it. Finally, I asked him again.

"Will you teach me, Dad?"

"Let me ask you something first..."

He seemed to be taking his time about it, as though he was reluctant to form the words, even in his mind for me to read.

"They tell me you tried to kill yourself this morning. Is that true?"

"Yes," I answered, controlling my impulse to ask whom he'd been talking to. 'They' were certainly on the job at the news desk.

His thoughts were silent for a moment, and I sensed a hint of pain.

"May I ask, why?"

May I ask. That surprised me more than the pain, because he could have taken it directly from my memories if he chose, in spite of my shields.

Suddenly I was overwhelmed by a sense of something I couldn't understand, and I wasn't even sure if it was coming from my father or from

me. I wanted very much to make him see how I felt about things... everything.

"Because I've lost everything that ever meant anything to me."

"What do you mean?"

"When I lost my body in the Abyss, I was sure that I could get it back and that everything would be all right again. But when I did, the Pattern was gone and the Abyss was there instead. I used it. I had to, to get myself out of a jam, but it's just not the same, and all I could think about was getting back to Amber and walking the Pattern so I could be myself again."

"Then, when I woke up this morning and found that this still wasn't my body, I panicked. I guess I just never noticed the changes with all the excitement in the Grove. Funny, I still counted on the Pattern to set things right."

"I rushed down there first thing and tried to walk it. With the first step I took, it blackened and died beneath my feet. I was so shocked I took another step, just to be sure. Daddy, I hate myself for that second step, even more than the first! I'm telling you, I was killing it. The Abyss in me was. I should have been able to feel it screaming and writhing in pain!"

I paused, overcome with all the emotions I had forced below the surface of my mind earlier in the day. For a moment I thought they would overwhelm me again. As I struggled for control, I felt Dad's presence, steadying me somehow. He didn't try to lessen what I was feeling, but filtered it instead, as though he was feeling it all as I was. Somehow, it helped.

When I got myself together I went on quickly, trying to get it all out before I lost my nerve. Daddy never interrupted... just listened.

"That's when I knew I didn't want to live anymore if I couldn't touch the Pattern again. I just can't face my life without it... all the promise and the power... and the glory..."

I realized that I meant every word I'd said... still meant it. My few hours of numb dignity... moving about... playing with the Abyss was just a last ditch effort at self-preservation. Now, more than ever, having touched Pattern again in this pure psychic form, I knew there was no going back. If Dad wouldn't help me... well... I'd find some way to finish it. This time I wouldn't leave a trail of blood for them to find...

He was silent. I knew he had caught my last train of thought, and I figured he must take me for a fool. I didn't care.

Then the dam broke and I felt an incredible sense of pain and regret wash over me, generated by my father and paralleling all of my own grief and loss.

Shocked, I saw that he understood. He really understood.

"I'm so sorry. I had no idea that you would feel this way!"

What other way was there to feel...?

Then we were interrupted by the Trump call. Not for me, of course. I don't think I've had two Trump calls in my entire life. I could feel it,

though, through Dad's psyche, as clearly as if it was my own. Fiona.

"Wait..." He shifted his mind away from me, and Fiona's stellar presence flooded in.

I wondered how she had reached him in this form, when I had only been able to reach the husk that was his body. I have begun to believe that her power is far beyond anything most of us can even imagine. Right now, she didn't seem to be aware of me at all, and I was just as glad she didn't.

It was the first time I had ever been in mental contact with my aunt when she wasn't trying to beat me down or shut me out. The brilliance and clarity of her mind amazed me. Most people are only able to project surface thoughts at best. I knew Dad was good, and Harlan... most of my cousins have the psychic capacity of chopped meat.

She was so brilliant she almost glittered.

There was also a genuine affection for my father, which surprised me as well. I never really believed Fiona actually cared about anyone. I could hardly believe that she didn't notice me in there. I could only assume that somehow, Dad was keeping my presence separated from the rest of his mental processes. Wish I could figure out how that was done...

On the other hand, he had made no attempt to block my awareness of the contact, which he probably could have done very easily if he had wanted to. An advantage. I decided to eavesdrop.

After all, Dad had never said I couldn't...

Fiona was filling him in on the Dworkin/Harlan situation. Her description was pretty accurate in detail. Considering her lack of participation during that little fiasco, I really couldn't see why she was making such a fuss now. Dad seemed to share her concern about Dworkin's interest in Harlan for reasons they didn't elaborate. They both seemed to feel it was a very bad sign.

Why? In light of what I had recently learned about their relationship, it just didn't seem that out of place. Why shouldn't Dworkin be interested in his son?

Personally, I felt that Dworkin's interest in Kelcey and Eleanor had been a lot more ominous. This they brushed off with scarcely a mention.

Then the topic of conversation changed. I won't say my ears burned, but...

"And we have another problem," Fiona was telling him.

"Which is?"

"Your daughter."

"How so?"

"She's been using the Abyss in Amber. Rather heavily, I might add. It's beginning to attract some of the wrong kinds of attention..."

"I'll take care of it," he told her.

"It's getting dangerous, Bleys. Something has to be done. The sooner the better. We have to put an end to it."

"I said, I'll take care of it," he reiterated, rather firmly.

She paused, and I could tell she was a bit puzzled by his reaction. He still hadn't given me away, although I'm sure he must have realized I was listening.

"Well, if you're sure you want to handle it..." she went on, doubtfully I thought.

He didn't answer her then, just let his mind go blank and implacable. She remained in contact for a few moments longer as if anticipating further discussion. There was none.

"Then I'll leave you to your work..."

She was gone.

I waited, trying to seem as innocuous and innocent as I possibly could. He seemed lost in thought, but it was nothing I could catch. He can reason awfully fast when he gets going...

"Your body... where is it?" Of all the questions he could have asked, I didn't expect that.

"Back in the tower with Eleanor, if she hasn't Trumped us elsewhere."

"The tower... you mean my tower?"

Uh-oh!

"Yessss..."

"How did you get there?"

"Trump," I answered. He didn't question me about it, and I was relieved. I couldn't have explained it anyway.

"Do you trust her?"

"Eleanor? Yes... yes, I do."

He seemed slightly amused by this.

"How far?"

"Do I trust her? With my life, I suppose..."

When I put it that way, it did sound kind of ludicrous. Trust is something not lightly given in our family. I tried to explain.

"She's helped me out before, Daddy. She's good with a sword, and she's got guts, in spite of whatever she might pretend. She came back down to the Abyss with me when I went after my body. She didn't have to do it, and all it bought her was the fate of having to face down Merlin, in Abyss form, when I was taking Lance down. She got herself out of it. She's no wimp!"

The undercurrent of amusement heightened. He cautioned, "You'd better be sure."

"I am... why?"

"Because if she's in the tower with your body and mine, she's in for trouble. I have certain... defenses... in motion there. They won't know friend from foe. They'll attack. You'd better be certain she's up to it."

"I am!" I insisted, praying it was so...

"Then let's begin," he said. "We're short on time."

For a moment, I couldn't figure out what he was talking about...

Then he began to explain it all... I mean, everything, just as I had asked him to. Most of it would probably sound pretty meaningless to you, or

anyone who doesn't live, breathe, eat and sleep with the Pattern in the forefront of her mind... I'm sure you get the picture, so I won't bore you with details...

Suffice it to say I learned more than I had ever believed there was to know, in that timeless time, there with my father. We were caught in a shared excitement that I just can't describe in any other way than to say I never dreamed there was so much to my world as I discovered then. In a way, we discovered it together, though most of it must have been old hat to him. There was a quality of awe and passion to his thoughts that cut me like a flame.

He caught my excitement and reveled in it.

He was delighted when I caught on to an idea that he was trying to explain and ran with it.

He praised my theories and conclusions with an enthusiasm that only fired me to reach for more. When I did, he gave it to me.

For the first time in my life, I felt that I had pleased him. I learned something else as well, perhaps the most important lesson of the day. Until that moment, I never really knew my father! I never saw the person he really was, the depths of his dedication and emotional commitment to this thing that formed the basis for our very existence.

Finally, as we paused a moment to reflect on what we'd shared, I knew I had to tell him.

"Dad, I've got something to say..."

"Yes..." I knew his mind was still on the point he'd been making.

"Daddy, I've got to tell you... I realize that, well... we never got along very well, did we?" I had his attention now. Lords! I was making a mess of this...

"Well, I was wrong."

His scrutiny was excruciating. I went on in a rush, before I could lose my nerve...

"I never gave you a chance, did I? I don't know why... maybe we're just too much alike. It's all or nothing, isn't it? No half measures. I just never felt that anything I did was good enough. I never felt like I could please you. Look, I just want to say that, before things change... before any more time passes us by... I love you, Daddy. I guess I always did. And I'm sorry..."

I knew my emotions would do me in someday! I was laying it on too thick. He must think I'm a terrible baby...

Not quite.

After a moment he sighed. There was an onrush of feeling, frustration, grief, and something like guilt... I'm not sure... Then he said it.

"I love you too, baby..."

What can I say. We're emotional people, us red-heads...

After that, we talked of other things. He explained his fears for the Pattern, and I was astounded to learn the reasons for his disquiet. Apparently, most of the dysfunction and weakness he had sensed from the

Pattern had something to do with the fact that there was another pattern, of alien nature, in close proximity. From what he told me, I understood that this was pretty well unprecedented. None of the other patterns in the stack were working against the strain of having so close a rival.

I was determined to study the problem with him, and he agreed that I could when there was time and things had stabilized. He mentioned that Fiona was vitally interested as well, which put me off a bit.

"She's always hated me," I insisted.

He chuckled.

"What makes you say that?" he asked. "She acts that way with everybody..."

"No, Dad. Have you ever seen the way she looks at me? As though I was some kind of bug on a pin..."

"That's how she looks at everyone..."

"No. I've seen her reactions to others. She smiles and is charming and sweet..."

Now he laughed outright.

"Do you really want Fiona to treat you that way?" he gasped out between fits of mirth.

I thought about it for a moment, and realized he was right.

"No, Daddy, I guess you've made your point. At least, with me she's honest. I think it would scare me to death if she ever started being nice..."

He couldn't answer. He was laughing too hard.

I still think she's a mean one...

Oddly, though, I happen to agree with Aunt Fiona about the other pattern. It has to be studied. Something has to be done. Dad showed it to me, and I saw how different, how really alien it was. I tried to compare it with mine, to find some sense of familiarity. The way they do with fingerprints, you know, like on a ten point scale, how many points are alike and how many are different. You just can't do it. The difference is all in style, not in execution. It's just completely wrong, that's all...

Dad explained how not even Brand, with all his evil machinations, could have created something so different, so unable to fit into the scheme of reality as we perceive it. The thing was having terrible effects on our Pattern, and nobody stood between the two of them but Dad, and sometimes Fiona... and me...

Suddenly, Dad seemed preoccupied with a terrible sense of urgency I was unable to pick up on any level. His whole aspect seemed to change, and I knew it had to do with me. Just when I was beginning to think I had done or said something wrong, he gave me a solid psychic shove.

"Bronwyn, there's no more time. You have to get back to your body... *now!* Eleanor's in big trouble. She can't hold out much longer..."

"But I can't leave now!" I protested. "There's still so much I don't know."

"It's going to have to wait, girl. Get going! If you don't, you may not live

to learn it..."

"But, Daddy, that's not even my body! Why should I care what happens to it?"

"Listen to me. Don't argue. If you want to get back to your own body, you've got to stay alive to do it. You need that body to support your psyche until then. Now move. Eleanor needs help!"

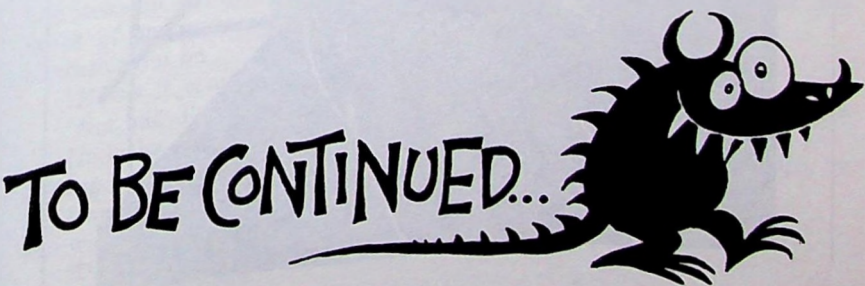
I moved. I'm not sure how, but the bonds that had held me were released, and I was propelled back through that dizzying sense of I-don't-know-what with the force of a physical blow.

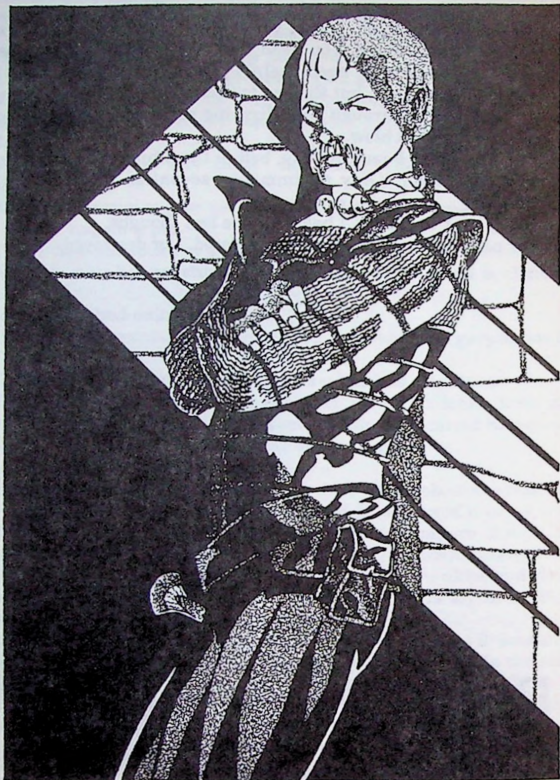
"I love you, Daddy..." I sent quickly, before I lost him.

There was no answer. Only an immense sensation of grief and guilt and... shame.

As I thudded back to reality, I held just one last thought.

That other pattern would have to be conquered... or destroyed...





Morgan turns so that I can see the Primal Pattern. It is covered with black smears that correspond exactly to the gouts of Oberon's blood on the Pattern...

The View From A Dungeon Cell

Carolán's Diary

by Don Woodward

(An Amber Diary, Based on a Campaign by Erick Wujcik)

"When firmness is sufficient, rashness is unnecessary."

— *Napoleon Bonaparte*

There is a rap at the door. From it's rhythm I can tell that it is Roger, who has once more managed to get himself assigned as my guard. Even before I can say 'enter', the door swings open and he pokes his head in.

"Breakfast?"

"A last meal so to speak?" Even though I try I can't keep all the irony out of my voice

He shrugs.

"Best make it a big one then. American. Eggs, sunny side up; rye toast, butter on the side; country sausage; honey baked ham; steak, medium and lean; hash browns, crisp; French toast with syrup from Canadian maples; orange juice; and tea."

As I order he hurriedly scratches out each item in his distinctive long hand. When he is finished he closes his ever present yellow writing pad and looks up, our eyes meet for a moment, then his flit over to the disorderly stack of papers next to the antiquated Royal I've been pounding this narrative out on.

"How's it coming?"

"Not bad. I'm finally getting to the climax."

He looks out my trump window at the greening oaks in the Arden. "It's getting late, do you think you'll finish in time?"

I nod. "Thanks for the loan of the typewriter. The capital 'L' skips, by the way."

"Didn't I tell you?"

I shake my head.

"Sorry."

I can sense there is something else he wants to say.

"Is there any chance I could..."

"Yes?"

"Could I read it, do you think? At least the part that's done..."

I smile. Knowing how fanatical Roger is to hear and record tales of our

family, I can well imagine how much anguish he must be feeling right now. He is probably quite sure that I will only finish my manuscript in time to hand it over to my father, Fiona, or Flora, any of whom would, no doubt, bury it in some secret library where it will remain unread for untold aeons.

"You are a guard?"

He nods.

"And you relish tales of this sort?"

He nods again.

"Who better then, to be given the task of protecting this story."

"Me?"

"Once it is finished I will place it in your safe keeping until such time as I return to claim it."

He gulps down his surprise then looks at me, "May I say something?"

I nod.

"You've been my favorite prisoner."

"Have I, now?"

He nods, "And one of my favorite Princes, as well. I've more interesting notes on you than on any of the others."

"Tis only because I'm so bad at being secretive."

"Nevertheless, I'm going to miss you when you're gone."

I nod and smile, "Now, about my breakfast."

He returns my smile, "Coming right up!"

I sit back down in front of the Royal and stare at it a moment. Where was I? Oh, yes...

If I wasn't so agitated over Brand's lies I'm sure I would have noticed that it wasn't Reaper's usual hoarse, raspy whisper. I walk toward the voice expecting to find Reaper.

Instead I meet Harlan and his spirit guide, Lobren. This Lobren is naked, though he is so caked with dirt and stuff I'd rather not describe, that it is difficult to tell at first. I'd've not thought it possible, but he cuts an even more pathetic figure than Reaper did when we first met.

Who is this Lobren and why is he Harlan's spirit guide? Somehow I find it difficult to believe that Harlan has actually killed someone.

I turn away from his dead companion and ask Harlan, "When did you see my father last?"

He gives me a quizzical look, "Back in Amber. Why?"

"Because he is here."

"In the Land of the Dead?"

"He followed you through the Trump Gate." I flash him an irritated look, "You must have just missed him when you cut off Brand's."

"When I cut...What the Hell are you talking about Carolan?"

"You didn't cut off Brand's head?"

"No!"

"He said..."

He looks at the pouch tied to his belt, "What would I have used, my brushes? When did you talk to Brand?"

"Not five minutes ago."

"Where."

I point into the swirling fog, "There's a greensward over that way."

Harlan looks in the direction I'm pointing and shivers, "Weren't you scared? He must be incredibly dangerous, even as a deadman."

As he speaks I picture Brand's head popping in and out of his shell, "He seemed neither frightening nor imposing when we spoke."

"What did he say?"

"That you cut his Bloody head off."

"But I didn't... I've never cut a head off anybody in my entire life. I'm not even certain I'd know how."

"Brand is of little or no consequence to you."

Almost in unison we turn in Lobren's direction. I shoot him my best inquisitorial look and demand, "And why not?"

"Because he cannot lead you to where you need to go."

"But you can?"

Lobren's smile cracks his face and dried bits of whatever fall off as he nods.

"Do you know where my father is?"

"Such things are known to me."

"Then take me to him."

He shrugs, "I am not your guide." He turns to Harlan, "And what of you? Have you no interest in finding your father?"

"You know who my parents are?"

Lobren's face breaks into another smile, "Who they are is a matter of little import to one who acts as Guide to the Living who walk amongst the Dead."

Harlan gives me a confused look, "What's that suppose to mean?"

"I think he's saying that he can lead you to them."

Lobren nods.

"Then take me to them!" commands Harlan.

Lobren begins to walk and we both fall in behind him. We haven't gone more than twenty steps when Reaper shows up.

"Where the Bloody Hell have you been," I challenge.

"Cut'n off Brother Brand's head, as you should have done."

Harlan glares at us a moment then turns on Lobren and demands that he "Take me to my parents, now!"

Lobren leads us into a sewer, the stench reminds me of Caine and the Sewers of Kaffa and my near disastrous exchange of steel with Bleys. How many life times ago was that?

We travel for far too long before eventually climbing out. Though the sewer muck clings to the rest of us in an attempt to escape its subterranean tomb, Lobren now appears dressed and smelling fresh as a daisy.

Is it my imagination or is he also fleshier than before?

We look around and, to our complete shock and amazement, find ourselves on the streets of Amber City. The Pattern comes rushing back to me in a wave. The sensation is almost orgasmic.

I try my Trumps, only the one of the Pattern carved into Tromperie's blade seems to be working.

We walk toward the Castle. Harlan thinks he spots a woman in one of the high tower windows. When he asks Lobren if she is his mother he is ignored.

Once inside the Castle, Lobren leads us down into the dungeons along the path that leads toward the Pattern Room.

"Why are we going down?," complains Harlan, "I saw her in the Tower."

Lobren spins on Harlan and glares him into silence. Bloody Hell, why can't I ever do that?

The man in the guard room is either dead or asleep, none of us bothers to investigate which. Reaper produces the key to the door that leads to the cells, and the Pattern beyond. He unlocks the heavy oaken door and Lobren pushes it open with a jarring thud that echoes down the dank and dimly lit hallway.

Lobren points a bony finger down the long corridor of cells. Harlan hesitates, then begins to protest yet again.

Lobren glares at him and snarls, "If you don't want my help then find her yourself," as his words reverberate off the narrow stone walls he wavers and disappears.

It seems almost as if he had Trumped out, but there was no rainbow blur. Could Lobren be a Pattern Master?

A voice echoes towards us from down the hallway, "She's in Corwin's cell." It sounds like it came from the direction of the Pattern Room, but the voice is so distorted that I cannot say to whom it belongs.

With a shrug, Reaper resumes his usual spot in the lead and guides us to the cell that once held Corwin.

There is a shapely blonde haired women kneeling before it. With a bit of shock I realize that she is not one of the local walking dead. Could she really be alive? Is this Harlan's mother?

The woman seems startled by our presence. She rises and turns in our direction. She stares at Reaper a moment, then turns to me. With piercing blue eyes she gives me the once over, then smiles. I am debating to myself whether her eyes more closely resemble ice or crystal when her line of sight settles on Harlan, who is a step or two behind me.

Her lips curl into an ugly sneer. She throws a dagger and hisses something I cannot make out clearly. I suspect its 'bastard'. I easily sidestep the dagger, realizing a moment too late that it's not aimed at me. As far as I know, Harlan has little or no martial training. So I am not surprised to hear a solid thunk, or to see the blade of the dagger buried deep in his

shoulder when I cast a hurried glance behind me.

Harlan says, "Mom?"

The women snarls and screams, "Monster!", as she hurls herself at us.

Now I realize that emotional outbursts and melodramatic scenes are a family trait, but this hardly seems the time or place for one.

I draw Tromperie and assume an en-garde position that will defend both Harlan and myself from her onslaught.

Though skilled, the mystery woman's forms are quite old and she is in neither Godfrey or Morgan's class. I have little difficulty holding my own. I suspect that, had she not been so enraged, she might have been a more difficult opponent.

Feeling a little cocky I demand her name.

Without missing a beat she replies, "You can take the name of Princess Nara to the Land of the Dead, stranger."

"But we are already there," I inform her while performing a tricky parry-feint-backhand slash combination.

My simple taunt so enrages her that she almost fails to block the slash.

Her recovery is awkward and leaves her off balance. When our blades come together I let mine slip along her edge hoping to nick an unprotected forearm but she recovers in time to bring us corps-a-corps.

As we begin to test one another's relative strength Harlan asks, "Are you my mother?"

She screams and renews her attack with a ferocious slash, parry, slash combination. With more difficulty than I'd have preferred I manage to parry each blow, answering with a low feint followed by a thrust hard and high. She knocks my incoming blow aside and launches into a furious slash, parry, slash, slash, thrust move that nearly gets past my guard, nearly but not quite.

Nara glares at me a moment. Whenever skill fails me I usually try wearing my opponents down with my normally superior strength. Since we seem stalemated, this would appear to be as good a time as any to start throwing some of my strength around. The thought has barely worked itself to the front of my mind when she begins to pound out her blows.

Sweet Jesus! She is far stronger than she looks. Stronger even than myself, and I'm no weakling. The fact that she can best me in strength negates the quickest edge my 'blood' normally gives me. I may still be able to wear her down, but if she is also of the "Blood" it could take hours. One never knows what can happen during such extended combats, especially when fighting opponents of superior skill.

Nara's current strategy forces me onto the defensive but, like the time I fought Reaper, I find that I am able to offset at least some of her superior strength with speed and deftness.

We fall into a routine and the regular rhythmic quality of our exchanges seem to be soothing her. It even appears that I might be able to go on the offensive once more when Harlan asks, "Why are you doing this?"

The sound of his voice enrages her anew. She lifts her sword high over her head which leaves me just enough time to half turn and glare at Harlan, "Want to try that again?"

She attacks with a crushing chop that I just manage to parry. I may have to reassess my earlier estimates. Her styles and forms may be old but I suspect she has mastered them all. I'm beginning to think that she might actually be better than me. Thank the Unicorn she can't see straight at the moment.

I'm no longer sure I can keep her away from Harlan, so I decide to try and get help. Even though my Trumps haven't been working I try reaching Morgan. I'm hoping that I'll have more luck with a Mental Trump than one of the standard paste board ones. The way Nara is pressing me I'll have little time for anything other than a quick snatch and grab. I activate the memorized image and come up with a contact of sorts, but the image is fuzzy and I can't get Morgan to reply.

Bloody Hell! I can hardly be worse off than I already am, right? I shrug then yank whoever is on the other end of my contact through.

I end up with Reaper. Two of them? What the Bloody Hell is...

As I watch in stunned confusion, the new Reaper "kills" the old one.

Bloody Fucking great! Like I really needed this.

Nara grins at my Reaper's death throes then begins to press me with renewed vigor. I am forced to turn my full attention back to her. Harlan will just have to deal with this new Reaper.

"All is feared where all is to be lost."

— Lord Byron

Reaper grabs Harlan and tosses him to a guard, who immediately puts a dagger to his throat.

This just keeps getting better and better!

The only consolation is that Nara seems far more interested in Harlan than me. She falls back into a defensive stance and orders the surviving Reaper to, "Slay the monster!"

Harlan indignantly shouts, "I'm a man, not a monster." The guard silences him by drawing blood with the dagger.

Nara begins to shake violently and chokes when she tries to speak, finally she manages, "Remove this abomination from my sight."

The guard starts to drag Harlan off but he yells, "Voile!" and the guard screams and drops him.

I thought Morgan said magic won't work here?

Nara drops her guard, screams in rage, and pushes past me. Maybe if I hadn't been so surprised I could have stopped her. As it is I'm nearly stunned from having my wind knocked out as she slams me against the stone wall.

I yell out to Harlan with the little breath I have remaining, "Run for it!" He looks in Nara's direction and his eyes grow big as saucers.

For a moment it looks like he's going to let her take him, then all at once he remembers what his feet are for and dashes up a nearby stairway.

The guard attempts to follow but staggers and falls.

This new Reaper, who is as alive as Nara, glares at me and says, "Sheath your sword or die!"

I trace a circle in the air before me with Tromperie's point. Reaper assumes a ready stance. When I can no longer hear Harlan's footfalls I Trump to the Pattern in Tromperie's blade.

Even before the rainbow of my passage has completely faded, Lobren enters the Pattern Room through the door. He drops to his knees and wails, "Harlan you have damned me forever!" Then he falls to the floor in a swoon.

Almost immediately his unconscious form begins to change, finally becoming a 6' 8" tall dead man.

'Nobody I know,' I think with a nonchalant shrug. Just another body. At least this one's not walking and talking anymore.

I run though my memorized place Trumps, the house on Front Street, my quarters in Amber Castle, Merlin's Ways, the Nexus...nothing.

Christ Jesus!

In desperation I even try the Unicorn. Still nothing!

This can't be Amber! Dammit, none of this is real! I'm still trapped in the Bloody Fucking Land of the Dead!

Gods but I want to be home.

No, that can't be altogether right. This Pattern must be real. It has to be the source of the power I felt returning to me when we left the sewer. Even now I can feel power emanating from it. It may not be The Pattern but it must be real. As real as Corwin's or Brand's, anyway.

Another Bloody Pattern. Now who do you suppose created this one? And what has all this to do with Harlan and his parents?

For an insane moment I actually stand there and try to figure it all out. Then it occurs to me that my best chance to escape this Bloody nightmare lies before me. All I have to do is walk to the center of this Pattern and will it to take me home. To the real Amber!

I take the first step without hesitation. I have yet to encounter a Pattern I can't walk. Besides, any risk, no matter how great, is justified if it gets me out of here before I go completely mad!

Reassuring blue sparks begin to shoot out from under my feet as I walk. By the time I have negotiated the First Veil I have convinced myself that I can be more help to Morgan and Harlan back in Amber than I can trapped here in Hell.

I am barely through the Second Veil when the body rises.

'Has it been three days already?' I ask myself.

Hmm, this walk must be restoring the 'old' me already because the remark's nonchalant lack of reverence and bitter edge surprises and even disgusts me a little.

As I pierce the Third Veil the dead thing begins to approach the Pattern.

By the time I am through the Fourth Veil I notice that it has come up to a place that is all wrong if it plans to get on behind me.

What is it up to I wonder as I hit the Fifth Veil.

Just before entering the Grand Curve the Pattern bends in such a way that I get a clear view of the body's face.

"Sweet Bloody Jesus!" 'Tis Oberon.

I don't need this. Not now! Not before the most difficult phase of negotiating any Pattern. I have no choice but to turn away from whatever it is that Oberon is doing and concentrate on the Grand Curve. With a deep sigh, I invoke the Unicorn and step forth.

There is a slight let up as you leave the Grand Curve, a moment of light headedness just before the final step that takes you off the Pattern. It is only one step but the effort it demands is incredible. I pour my entire being into the labor of lifting my left foot then suddenly...

Release. The step is made. The tension leaves my body in a rush leaving behind a sensation that is indescribable. For a moment I feel completely drained. Then the Center embraces me, its touch is cool and comforting like a gentle hand on a feverish brow. Suddenly I am recharged, invigorated, literally reborn. I bask in the afterglow a moment then turn toward Oberon.

He stands at the Pattern's edge. Though whether he is staring at me or through me I cannot tell.

"I am Carolan, son of Random, and Heir to the Throne of Amber."

He blinks several times then his eyes clearly focus on me.

"What is this place?"

He looks me over from head to foot then answers, "It is the substance of a guilty conscience. The reality of a father's guilt."

His voice is a disappointment. He doesn't sound anything like I imagined he would. But then people rarely do.

Hmm, Maybe there's a chance I can find out what's going on as well as get out of here.

"Whose guilt?" I ask. "Your's?"

"I, who am responsible for all that follows, am most responsible for this."

"What can be done to alleviate your guilt?"

"It is now eternal. What is done is done."

"Is Harlan from this place?"

Oberon looks away. He stares off into space a second then begins to sob. After a few moments he begins to claw at his chest as if he wished to rend his garments. There's just one problem, he's naked as the day he was born. His attempts do, however, begin to create gouges deep enough to bleed.

'Unicorn's Horn!' He's closer to the Pattern than he should be bleeding, even a little.

Still sobbing Oberon drops to his knees.

'Tis bad. I need help. Lots of help!

I shuffle though my memorized Trumps, starting with Random. Nothing! Desperation rushes though me as I pull out my regular deck and fan it. Nobody, nothing. Bloody Hell! I can't even raise Oberon and he's standing right in front of me.

Wait a minute, what was that. Was that a live one? Yes, by the Unicorn that last one was functional. I activate it, even before looking to see who it is.

Herdan answers, "Who? Is that you, Carolan? Where are you? What the Hell is going on?"

"Never mind all that," I say, "look!"

"Oh, shit!"

"What is it? What's wrong?", a masculine voice demands from outside my field of view.

Herdan is apparently not alone.

For some reason Herdan and whoever he is with seem to think I'm at the Primal Pattern. Their theory makes no sense to me, but then I'm not a Pattern Master.

Herdan's star shaped amulet glows and he pulls that teleport trick that all Pattern Masters seem capable of. It requires all my newly acquired Trump skills to maintain the contact as he fades.

Herdan and one of his brothers, I think it is the one called Adrian, seem to be at the Primal Pattern. But I'm not there.

I'm in the Bloody Fucking Land of the Dead and Oberon is beginning to drip!

Herdan tells me to pull him through, and I do, and they both appear next to me at this Pattern's center.

Herdan studies the situation.

Adrian turns to Oberon and says, "I am Adrian, son of Corwin."

Oberon's only reaction is to rise and walk into the Pattern.

Christ Jesus! I didn't think that was possible. He's actually walking against the flow of power.

Herdan staggers and mutters something about the, 'Pattern's pain.'

In complete and total desperation I try the only thing that has gotten any sort of real reaction out of Oberon so far. I shout, "Harlan."

But Oberon seems past caring even about Harlan. He takes four more steps, stops, materializes two nasty looking knives from somewhere and proceeds to slash open his guts. He uses a double diagonal cut as though he were trying to commit seppuku with two knives.

Blood gushes everywhere. There is a painful blinding flash of light as the first gouts hit the Pattern. Even though I manage to cover my eyes with my left hand, fireflies dance before my tightly closed eye lids. It must be

some minutes before I can open my eyes. When I do the Pattern is already covered in great black gouts of coagulating blood. As its sanguine wounds begin to ooze and spread the Pattern starts to throb and then to dim.

Herdan tries to stabilize the damaged areas. He keeps the black from spreading but the effort requires more power than he or his engine has. He staggers and I grab him to keep him from falling out of the center. That's when I notice that both of us are looking more than a little pale.

All around us the electric blue glow of the Pattern grows duller and duller.

I shift Herdan in my left arm and turn to Adrian, "Time to go!" I yell.

He nods.

As we fade away I think I hear Oberon cry out something about, "embracing oblivion." Then there is the disorienting sensation of not being where you just were and the three of us appear in the Throne Room of the Real Amber.

It could have been my imagination I suppose, or it could even have been Herdan. Because the next clear memory I have beyond relief and the pleasure of truly being home is Herdan lecturing us on how close we came to being erased out of existence back there.

How did we get out? Did the Pattern act on my sub-conscious desire to be gone or did Adrian have some trick up his sleeve? A problem for some later time. At the moment all I want to do is suck up the essence of Amber. "I'm Back!" I shout out loud.

Herdan allows me little time for revelry. He is worried that what happened in the Land of the Dead may be affecting the Pattern here but he's so weak he can barely stand. Despite his condition he tries something that I don't understand and passes out.

Bloody Christ! Now what? Herdan was the only one of us who had any idea what's going on and now he pushed himself into unconsciousness. I can't help but admire his guts.

Herdan was worried about the Pattern. The only thing I can think to do is to try and make Trump contact with it through Tromperie. I'm not sure what this will accomplish but sometimes you just have to take a chance.

I open the contact. Then oblivion, after which I wake up with a splitting headache.

Herdan is also awake and complains that his Pattern Engine is turning black. He believes that all the Patterns are somehow connected and that the severity of damage to the one in the Land of the Dead is going to destroy them all eventually if we don't somehow stop what is happening.

Adrian is trying to gather help though the Trumps.

Not a bad idea, that. We could sure use some help but who?

Morgan claims to be a Pattern Master, if he's not still trapped in the Land of the Dead he could probably help.

I try his Trump. He answers. He is with Harlan. Apparently both of them have escaped the Land of the Dead as well.

Harlan starts to explain about how the 'living' Reaper was really Morgan and how he eventually rescued him. But Morgan silences him with a glare and a curt, "There's no time for that now."

I appraise them of the situation here in Amber and ask, "Where are you?"

Morgan turns so that I can see the Primal Pattern. It is covered with black smears that correspond exactly to the gout of Oberon's blood on the Pattern in the Land of the Dead. They continue to ooze and spread, like india ink spilled from a bottle, even as I watch. We have very little time left.

I hurriedly try to explain Herdan's theories to Morgan.

Morgan nods then says that he wants to try and contact Deirdre.

Herdan nods and says that we need to get down to the Pattern anyway.

I shut down my contact with Morgan but am careful not to break the actual link. We may need to get a hold of him in a hurry and I want to be ready.

When Herdan and I get to the Pattern in the Dungeon it appears normal.

This perplexes Herdan.

I tell him that this is exactly what it was like when the Dragon ate Amber. The damage was to the Primal Pattern not the one down here in the basement.

Herdan is worried about his engine. Why would the damage be reflected there and not on the Pattern?

I'm about to suggest that it might have something to do with that fact that his Engine is aligned to Corwin's Pattern. I'm no Pattern Master, but it seems logical to me that the original Pattern would be the last one to be effected by whatever it is that's happening, but I am interrupted by the arrival of Jeremi and Adrian. We all decide to go to the Primal Pattern.

I re-open the Contact with Morgan and he pulls us through.

By the time we arrive the Primal Pattern has been almost completely consumed by the blood of Oberon.

Herdan's amulet glows brightly and the spread slows noticeably.

Morgan and Herdan put their heads together. They spend what seems like an awfully long time discussing what Fiona and the others did to restore the Primal Pattern after the Dragon had hurt it.

After several life-times they come up with a theory. Which they immediately put to the test. It works, they have stopped the spreading stain on the Primal Pattern, but they are merely holding it at bay. The source of the problem still lies in the Land of the Dead.

There is nothing for the rest of us to do.

I walk over to Harlan, who is fussing with his Trump. He jumps when I touch his arm.

"What's wrong?"

He sneaks a sideways glance at Morgan, watches him for several

moments, then turns back to me, and in his best conspiratorial tone explains, "It's Morgan. I don't know about him. After you left, they came after me." He looks down at his feet, "The castle wasn't exactly the same," he shrugs, "That, or I got turned around, because I got trapped in a cul-de-sac that shouldn't have been there." He sneaks another peek in Morgan's direction, "I was trapped by Nara, Reaper and two guards.

"Nara started screaming 'kill the abomination!' I didn't have my Trump and every time I tried to talk to her she went berserk. I was scared and didn't know what to do. Then, it was weird, ah..."

After a while, I prompted him, "It was weird, and...?"

"Ah... Reaper starts talking to Nara and she actually begins to listen."

Without seeming to notice, Harlan fans his Trump.

"And then, the next thing I know Nara is lowering her sword. She finally looks away from me. Then Reaper kills her!"

"That's it?" I said, "he killed her?"

"I think she asked him 'why' before she died, but he didn't pay any attention. He just turned to the guards and said 'I rule here now.'

"Then he turned on me! I thought he was gonna' kill me. Instead he smiled and whispered, 'Harlan, it's me, Morgan.'"

He fidgets with his Trump a moment, then looks me directly in the eyes, and asks, "Why'd he kill her?"

I shake my head, "I don't know."

Harlan says, "What if she really is my mother?"

I shrug and turn toward Morgan. I watch him for several minutes as he battles to save the Pattern. After a while I give up trying to look into his soul. It is far too dark too dark for the likes of me to penetrate. I wish I knew what to say to Harlan, but I don't. I've never understood Morgan any better than my aunts and uncles understood Oberon.

Oberon. That's it!

If we could get Oberon's body off the Pattern of the Land of the Dead, it might stop the spread of the blood. I suggest this to Morgan and Herdan.

Morgan shakes his head and Herdan explains that the damage is more metaphysical, at this point, than real.

If that's true, and if the damage to the Primal Pattern is merely a metaphysical reflection of the damage to the Pattern in the Land of the Dead, then perhaps our efforts would be even more effective there, at the source of the problem. If there is some sort of connection between the two Patterns then somebody will need to get Oberon's bleeding body off it first before we can remove the stain on the second. Besides standing around here watching Morgan and Herdan stare at the Bloody Pattern is driving me crazy! I need to be doing something. I take out a pad and a pencil and start to create a Trump of the Pattern Room in the Land of the Dead.

My concentration is broken by cheering. I look up from my work and glance over at the Primal Pattern. Whatever Herdan and Morgan are doing is working better than before. The ebony stain is beginning to retreat.

Morgan looks at Herdan, flashes him a wry grin, and says, "What do we do with it once we've pushed the stain all the way back?" Herdan looks at Morgan and shrugs.

"When you get to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on."

- Franklin D. Roosevelt

I watch Herdan and Morgan for a while but their battle with the blood stain on the Pattern looks to be a long one. I go back to working on my Trump. Returning to the Land of the Dead is the last thing I ever want to do, but what if a permanent solution cannot be achieved on this end?

I'm just in the middle of a particularly difficult curve in the Pattern when a Trump Call starts to demand my attention. I ignore it. The nagging becomes more insistent. Eventually it becomes too distracting to continue working so I take out my Deck and shuffle through the images until I can determine the identity of the caller.

'Tis Harlan. I look over to where he was standing just a few moments ago and sure enough he is gone.

I accept the call. He's on fire. No, he's in fire or surrounded by it. A blast of heat and foul smelling fumes hits me the moment the rainbow stops twinkling. I turn up my nose in disgust and yank him out of there.

When he stops coughing he shrugs and explains that he had tried to Trump Dworkin but that the Cards aren't working right.

I glare at him. "Are you sure? Can you be absolutely certain that the problem is in the Trumps? Because if it is then there is little point in finishing this one."

He looks at my half finished drawing of the Pattern Room in the Land of the Dead then shakes his head. "Something else may have caused the interference."

"Maybe even Dworkin?"

He nods sullenly and heads over to Jeremi and Adrian.

I go back to work on my Trump. It is better than just sitting around watching Herdan and Morgan fight back the dark patches marring the Pattern.

Eventually the Trump is finished.

It is the most complicated piece I've created yet and I'm quite happy with the result. All that remains is to pour power into it and bring it to life.

As I begin that all important final step that will turn a piece of colored pasteboard into an artifact of power, there is a commotion over in the direction of the Pattern Masters.

Herdan yells, "Something is wrong. It's getting stronger!"

"Push harder!" yells Morgan even though he's standing right next to Herdan. Both of them seem to be straining against some overpowering

invisible force.

Herdan concentrates on his Pattern Engine, "There it's stopped."

Morgan strains with effort, "But we can't push it back anymore. What happened."

Herdan shrugs and concentrates on his engine, "Maybe if we focus the power..."

Harlan looks over my shoulder at the half-born Trump, "Maybe you should stop."

But I ignore him as a strange power I've never experienced before runs through me.

Morgan must have heard him because he gives me one of his "I'm not happy" glares and demands, "Whatever you're doing stop. It's making the Blood stain stronger."

I ignore him as well. What is this power? Where is it coming from? From me? From the Trump? Hmmm.

Adrian tries to snatch the Trump from my hand. But I easily evade his clumsy grab. I glare at him a moment without losing my contact with the Trump.

Power flows from me into the Trump and back into me in an infinite loop. But with each pass through me the Trump becomes more 'real'. I don't completely understand what is happening.

More Real. Sweet Jesus! 'Tisn't the Trump that's becoming real, 'tis the scene it depicts! I seem to be creating the place I've just drawn; bleeding corpse, shattered Pattern, and all. Unbelievable! I'd no idea that such power existed within the Trumps.

But how can I create this place if it already exists? There is still so much I don't understand about Trump.

Adrian and Harlan are both yelling at me to stop.

Stop what? Of course the Trump. They want me to stop before the Bloody thing becomes real. Not a bad idea that. We sure as Bloody Hell don't need two of them. I cut my psyche link to the Trump and the Power immediately flows from my body.

"What the Hell were you doing," Morgan yells.

I look in his direction, shrug, and answer, "I don't know."

He gives a deadly glare but is still too preoccupied fighting the spread of the stain to do much else.

Adrian pulls out my Trump and starts to concentrate on it. What the Bloody Hell does he think he's up too? I'm standing right here!

I get the familiar tingle of a Trump's touch and almost accept it without checking first to see if it is Adrian. As soon as I draw forth my deck and begin to scan for the caller the contact drops. Also immediately I get a second contact which turns out to be Adrian.

I glare at him through the contact, "What?"

"Ah, just testing."

"Testing what, for Unicorn's sake?"

He shrugs, "I was getting the wrong people on my Trumps."

"Wrong?"

"Actually they were the right people they just didn't seem to know me."

"Like you never existed?"

He shakes his head, "More like they were from the past and I didn't exist yet."

I turn to Harlan and Jeremi, "What do you think?"

They, in turn, demand to know what I had been doing. Since I don't really understand it yet myself 'tis difficult to explain. I try by giving them my theories. Jeremi shrugs them off. But Harlan seems both interested and amazed.

It still surprises me how little Harlan actually knows about Trumps and their operation. Most of the time he barely seems to know more than I do, let alone as much as Jeremi. Maybe its not his fault though, perhaps he only knows as much as Dworkin wants him to know.

By the time Harlan and I have finished our discussion of Trump Theory. Jeremi has primed one of his dancing Trumps and sets it to walking the Primal Pattern.

Morgan draws an energy pistol and attempts to shoot the card but the beam stops short of the Pattern's second turning.

Adrian tries to attack Morgan with a power word.

I draw Grayswandir and press it to Adrian's throat, "Bad idea."

He freezes. The whites of his eyes grow huge as he stares down Grayswandir's blade but he still has courage enough to say, "That belongs to my father."

I smile and nod.

He lowers his eyes to the ground and steps away from Morgan.

I lower Grayswandir. Its Pattern, at least, still glistens unstained.

By this time Jeremi's Trump is halfway though the Pattern. Wherever it encounters the metaphysical black stuff that represents Oberon's blood the stain withers and fades.

I try to contact it like I did the time when a similar Card of Jeremi's 'walked' Reaper's Pattern. This Card accepts the contact without resistance. Like that other Card its mind feels like a computer, only this time it seems much more three dimensional. More real. Before I can determine if it is, indeed, the same Card, Jeremi does something to disrupt our contact. Before it completely fades I get a flash of every Trump Jeremi has created. At least I think that's what I saw. The images flashed by so quickly that they might even have belonged to every Trump that's ever existed.

Could Jeremi's Computer Trump somehow be connected to all Trump, everywhere? It certainly seemed 'real' enough. In fact, it seemed to be getting more real the entire time I was in contact with it.

I wonder who taught Jeremi his lessons? Whoever he was, he was a damn sight better teacher than Dworkin.

The Card starts to flash through various scenes as though it were

reviewing its various functions. A wave of psyche pours out of it strong enough for everyone in the area to feel.

Jeremi asks, "What's wrong."

"Nothing." it answers.

It talks too! The Bloody thing is spooky. It's beginning to remind me of HAL 9000.

Herdan tries to stop HAL. Even though I don't yet understand its true nature I have to wonder why, especially since it seems to be the only thing capable of permanently getting rid of the ebon stain. For a moment the two brothers struggle silently while pouring power into their respective artifacts then HAL breaks through to the Pattern's center. As the last of the black stuff fades away HAL trumps himself back into Jeremi's card case.

Something is happening to the Pattern. I'm no Master but even I can feel it changing.

Herdan studies his Engine a while then declares the Pattern is "unstable", whatever that means.

He puts his head together with Morgan and they begin muttering to themselves again.

Jeremi looks over at them, smiles smugly, and explains, "It was Dworkin who designed the Primal Pattern but then Oberon changed it by creating a fourth reflection in the Land of the Dead." He turns away from the two Pattern Masters and looks over toward Harlan and myself, "The Pattern there is disappearing. It will bother you no more." He turns back to the Pattern Masters, "Any Amberites still there should be ejected as it disappears."

What makes him such an expert all of a sudden? How does he know all this? Herdan and Morgan are the Bloody Masters.

Sweet Jesus, HAL must have told him. Don't tell me the Bloody thing's omniscient, too. It must be. The only other way it could learn information like that is if it talked to the Pattern.

Yeah, right. Like the Pattern talks.

Unicorn's Horn! What if it does? Talk, I mean. That would mean... The Pattern couldn't be alive could it? Of course HAL talks and he's not alive, at least not in any sense I understand. But the Pattern...

Suddenly Random appears in a burst of rainbow colors. He points a half eaten chicken leg at me and demands, "When did you walk the Pattern, Cory?"

Wha...?

"It seems we now exist in a time before the Patternfall War." interrupts Jeremi.

I ask this 'young Random' about details from my childhood and he answers each query correctly. He's the real thing. Jeremi must be right. We're in the Bloody past.

God's Balls! Why do these things keep happening to me? All I wanted to do was to go home. But No! The Bloody Fucking past, yet!

Herdan's engine throbs with power and the Pattern begins to pulse in time to its rhythms.

Morgan nods to Herdan and says that the Pattern appears to be more stable. Both Herdan and Morgan seem to visibly relax.

Morgan does something with the Pattern then claims that he can see the final battle of the Patternfall War taking place right at this moment. He says that Jeager and Nara are there as well as a few others he doesn't recognize. Jeager is, in fact, leading the Amberite charge.

Great! Fabulous! But I still want to go home!

Jeremi seems lost in a conversation with no one. I'll bet he's talking to HAL.

I'd really like to know what they're talking about.

I wonder if I could use Jeremi's card to try and make contact with HAL but not Jeremi. If the touch were light enough Jeremi might not even be aware of it.

It works, though I suspect that this is probably because HAL seems to want the contact more than any particular skill on my part. HAL seems almost anxious to touch minds besides Jeremi's.

When I establish the contact, HAL is in the middle of explaining to his master that we are now in the Past because the fourth reflection of the Primal Pattern, the one in the Land of the Dead, is fading out of existence.

When Oberon modified the Primal Pattern he bent it in such a way that all things 'created' since the modifications would cease to exist if they were ever removed. HAL seems to think that only Harlan, who according to HAL, is much older than any of us suspects, will survive the dissolution of the Pattern in the Land of the Dead. Once that Pattern is gone, not even standing in the Center of the Primal Pattern will save us because our Primal Pattern will no longer exist, either.

Sweet Bloody Unicorn!

Jeremi asks HAL why Harlan has no Pattern if he's so old and HAL replies, 'Because Harlan has not walked the Pattern does not mean that he is incapable of doing so.'

Then Jeremi asks how can we save ourselves and HAL replies, 'By restoring the Pattern in the Land of the Dead.'

Jeremi tells HAL to take him there. My contact breaks and when the rainbow hues fade away Jeremi is gone.

I take out my Trump of the Splattered Pattern and pour in psyche. I feel the place coming alive, Morgan and Herdan start yelling about the black stains returning but at this point I don't care. I want to go home, now!

Trump magic swirls through the pasteboard card and it begins to grow cool to my touch. As soon as the Trump image is formed and locked in place I trump myself, Harlan, and Adrian to the Pattern Room in the Land of the Dead, leaving Herdan and Morgan behind to battle the returning stains.

When we arrive Jeremi is already there. If it was my Trump that made this place real how was he able to get here before me?

He looks up from studying what's left of this Pattern but does not acknowledge our presence.

He turns back to the Splattered Pattern and begins to concentrate. Multi-colored sprays of light fill the black area that was once a Pattern. All along the lines of the Pattern, Trump power dances, creating rainbows within rainbows. Trump effects reflect off the walls of the Pattern chamber like some wildly out of control kaleidoscope. The images remind of some of the psychedelic light shows I've seen in films on the 60's. Suddenly the lights go off, just like someone threw a switch, and both Oberon's body and all of the blood disappear. Neat trick, that! Another of HAL's many talents I'd wager.

But we're not out of the woods yet. As I look down at the Pattern it is strangely dark and lifeless like a burned out light bulb.

I reestablish contact with HAL in time to hear him tell Jeremi that even though the blood has been removed this Pattern will have to be walked in order to restore it.

I have just walked this Pattern and know it's turnings. Before Jeremi can act I step on. I concentrate only on this particular Pattern, trying to reinscribe its exact image. Each step I take ignites the Pattern under my feet with electric blue-white fire. Jeremi and Adrian follow behind me and each step they take produces reassuring sparks.

When we are all in the Center Jeremi asks HAL if there are other Amberites here.

'Your father and the King are about,' is the Trump's tart reply.

Could it be that HAL has begun to resent is master already or is he just uninterested in Corwin and Random's whereabouts?

Jeremi takes out a Trump of Random.

Random? Why not Corwin?

He easily makes contact with my father who appears to be with Martin and Osric in a bar. When Jeremi is satisfied that he is the 'real' Random he breaks the contact and Trumps out.

I stare at the fading rainbow that marks his passing for several moments. What the Bloody Hell was that all about? Doesn't he give a damn about his father's safety or whereabouts? I don't think I understand any of Corwin's kids, sometimes I wonder if I ever will. What an odd lot.

Since I know my father is safe and since I was originally sent here to find Lord Corwin I take out his Trump. I get an immediate contact.

"Pull me though," a voice cries in an urgent tone.

I look over to Adrian.

"That's my father's voice pull him though."

I grasp the offered hand and pull.

At first I cannot believe that the emaciated figure before me is Corwin. He stumbles and I am forced to catch him to prevent him from falling onto the Pattern. When he falls into my arms I see his face clearly for the first time, his eyes have been burned out of their sockets.

Adrian cries, "Father!" and reaches out for me to hand Corwin to him.

"Look at his eyes, 'tis Corwin I hold, but is he your father?"

Adrian steps toward me and takes his father, if that is who this is, in his arms. I let him.

Corwin and Adrian begin to talk about cars and holding companies, or some such, and Adrian becomes convinced that this is, indeed, the right Corwin.

Adrian takes out a Trump of someplace in Bright and says, "I'm taking you home."

Corwin weakly raises a hand to stop him, looks at me and says, "Thank you. Brand had me. He kept ranting and raving about recreating the days of my imprisonment."

His hand falls weakly to his side and before I can ask him where and how he met Brand Adrian whisks them both away to Bright."

Damn!

I will the Pattern to send me back to the Primal Pattern. When I arrive Herdan and Morgan are just mopping up.

They explain that once again they were forced into a contest of raw power against the spreading black ooze, then it suddenly grew weaker. As the stain weakened they found that not only could they push it back but that they could eradicate it as well. Just about the time they had pushed the stain to the Pattern's edge the 'young' Random disappeared.

"That's when I knew we'd won," explains Herdan with a sigh of relief.

"After that it was just mopping up," Morgan explains with a smart-alec smile that would have fooled anyone but me and Gwynt.

Herdan takes out a Trump of Jeremi. They talk in whispers. When they are finished Herdan says he is going to Rotel, a shadow in Bright and with a nod to me and Morgan he disappears in a burst of colors.

I toss Morgan his stuff and yell to him, "I think I'll tag along."

As I try to construct a usable image from Herdan's fading Trump effect, I can hear Morgan calling my name but I have no time to answer. In another moment my Construct's lingering connection to Herdan will have completely faded. I feed psyche into the Trump Image and it whisks me away.

I've never actually tried anything like this before but, according to all my theories, it should work.

"The superiority of some men is merely local. They are great because their associates are little."

— Dr. Samuel Johnson

Normally Trump transits are instantaneous. Not this one. Just before stepping out of the Rainbow I heard Herdan's voice say, "Who? Oh, alright let him through."

As the multi-colored light show fades around me Herdan turns toward

me, "Next time you could ask."

I shrug, "Sorry, I was just testing a theory."

He gives me a glare that is almost as withering as one of Morgan's.

I ignore him and smile instead at his beautiful companion.

RULE NUMBER SEVEN: *Cousins will be around forever, beautiful woman usually spoil long before then. The order of priorities then is, beautiful women first, cousins second.*

The Lady barely clears Herdan's shoulders, is curvy without being voluptuous, has thick glistening brown hair, big dark grey eyes, and an ageless beauty that reminds me of Fiona and Flora.

Who is she? Another sister? I scan her Trump Image to find out.

My talents, are still too raw and far too crude to reveal much beyond the fact that she has no Pattern, is strong with psyche, and reeks of latent Trump energies.

A Trump Artist then, but not Family. Interesting. I've never met anyone outside of the Family who was versed in Trumps. Her higher than normal psychic potential may explain her abilities but who taught her the Art? Surely not Dworkin. Could she be self-taught, like myself?

She returns my smile then turns to Herdan and asks, "Will you introduce me to your cousin?"

Herdan looks from her to me and back again, then shrugs and says, "Lotania, I'd like to present to you my cousin, Carolan of Amber. Carolan, allow me to present Lotania, Trump Mistress of Rotel."

Trump Mistress. Sounds impressive, I wonder what Rotel is?

The Lady nods. I bow, and when she offers her hand I kiss it. Her nails are closely trimmed and her hands, though freshly scrubbed, smell slightly of naphtha and turpentine. They are strong yet graceful and despite the fact that she obviously works with them, quite attractive.

Herdan looks at me and frowns again. "I am afraid I have business elsewhere," he turns to the Lady, "could you find the time to show Carolan around?"

There is something in his tone that convinces me I have acquired a new baby-sitter, but I must confess that this one's company should be more enjoyable than Morgan's.

The Lady nods and says, "T'would be a pleasure."

Lotania shows me to a sitting room where we make small talk for a time. Polite, meaningless, conversation has never been a passion of mine, but Flora insisted on schooling me in Drawing Room etiquette, so I hold my own.

Eventually we get around to art and a conversation with some substance. Once we begin to actually 'talk' to one another the natural eddy and flow of a genuine conversation carries us right into dinner.

By the time the servants have cleared away the dishes I have learned several things about my host.

Her hair has gray highlights that you don't notice at first glance and her skin has a subtle gray quality that reflects the warm glow of candles in fascinating ways.

She is naturally beautiful and wears no makeup.

She is knowledgeable on a wide range of subjects and has a sharp fluid mind but, unlike Caine, her cunning seems more intuitive than calculating.

After dinner Lotania invites several friends over and a rather lively discussion on modernism ensues. By the time the conversation peters out, the birds are singing in the dawn. It has been far too long since I have been able to sit and talk away an evening and not have too worry about the consequences for the rest of Reality.

The last time I engaged in such a free-for-all was back in Paris before I took my first walk though Shadow. How long ago was that? Surely it cannot have been the lifetimes it seems?

All the same I must confess that I am a bit disappointed. I was hoping for a chance to spend some time with Rotel's Trump Mistress alone.

After she closes the door on the last of her friends, Lotania yawns and suggests we retire. As I make my way to the guest room I can't help but wonder if there was a hint of invitation in her parting smile.

The next day we begin the Grand Tour of Rotel and what a marvelous place it turns out to be! If Heaven is the place where dreams come true then Rotel is Heaven, because it is an artist's dream come true. Everyone is involved, either directly or indirectly, in the creation or sale of art. Trump Artistry is quite common here, so common, in fact, that the locals use Trumps like telephones and hawk them in the streets.

There are so many artists in Rotel that models are in high demand. The most beautiful and talented own their own studios and the artists go to them instead of vice versa.

Rotel is a world full of artists, artisans, and skilled laborers. There seems to be little visible aristocracy and the people seem to put little value on titles. A man is admired for his works, not the street he was born on. In Rotel all men are considered equal until one proves himself to have a superior talent or skill. Even then he can expect only those who share that talent or skill to defer to him in any way.

Rotel is not unique because of its egalitarianism though. What is truly astounding about the place is the accessibility the common people have to Trumps. In Amber, the Trumps and their attendant magic belong only to my Family, but in Rotel they are, quite literally, everywhere. The Bloody things seem almost ubiquitous and their variety is nearly endless!

There are Trumps for every purpose, including some I'd never heard of. For instance, I saw one merchant selling a Trump that depicted a table set

with a full course meal from which you could retrieve fully cooked and deliciously eatable food. Fantastic! After a while I find myself hiding my surprise and delight from Lotania for fear of looking like some country yokel on his first trip to the big city.

Our tour reminds me very much of the one I took with Fiona my first day in Amber. With one rather notable exception, everywhere we stop a conversation ensues. Everyone in Rotel seems to know and like Lotania and she, in turn, seems equally fond of everyone.

Lotania is extremely social, particularly by Amber standards, but then almost everyone in Rotel seems more willing to sit and talk than folks back home. Perhaps this is because everyone's lives are so tightly bound together by a common dependence on art and the Trumps.

On the first day of our tour Lotania takes me to the academy where she studied advanced art. Though its facade is very different, once inside its walls I am immediately reminded of the Art College in Cabra. We haven't been there more than five minutes when a discussion on the physiology of myth spontaneously combusts.

Two hours later we are haggling with farmers in a country market and soaking up country-sized yarns. Each purchase starts or ends with, "There is a tale behind these apples," or whatever. Lotania smiles and listens to each legend as though she has never heard them told before.

She is witty, outgoing, and a skilled conversationalist. But she also has a natural charm that lets her step from a conversation with art students directly into one with green grocers and peddlers.

The tour was enlightening, but I made my most interesting discovery of the day shortly after dinner. Lotania had a guest with which she needed to discuss business and I was left to wander about the house for a while.

I found a room whose walls were lined with books and went in. After a bit of browsing I decided that it must be a private study, and not the library, because the books are nearly all art related. Under a stack of very old, very heavy tomes on Aquarelle techniques I discover several portfolios. They are filled with drawings and watercolors of Lotania, at various ages, and in each of the color pieces she has gray hair!

As a toddler, the gray strands are paler and more delicate than her brown hair but as she grows older they take on both a richer hue and a thicker texture until the only difference between the two is color. This also seems to be true of her unique skin coloration, in her baby pictures the gray is so subtle as to be unnoticeable but continues to deepen as she ages.

There are a great many pieces of Lotania as a pre-pubescent girl and almost an equal number of her as a fully developed teen but very few, if any, from the gawky transitional period that normally runs between the two. Except for some variations in height the girl in most of the teen portraits looks exactly like the woman I know today. Lotania apparently never looked girlish. That, or she refused to pose during her awkward years. My gut instinct is that she was one of those girls who went directly from child to

woman.

I am still going through the portfolios when she finds me.

"Oh, here you are."

"Business finished?"

She nods, then frowns slightly when she notices what I've gotten into, "Those were my father's."

"His hand?"

She nods. "Models are always difficult to find in Rotel, I often posed for him when I was growing up."

"The likenesses are stunning."

"Thank you. I think my father would have been pleased to hear you say so, you two share the same sense of aesthetics."

"The beauty of his subject no doubt inspired him."

She crosses the room and closes the portfolio, "I never thought of myself as beautiful then. I always felt awkward and out of place as a child."

"All children go through a similar phase."

"I wasn't going through a phase. I was convinced I was quite the ugly duckling and couldn't wait to grow up."

I give her one of my best boyish grins spiced with just a hint of lechery, "Well then, you grew into a most beautiful swan."

Her left brow arcs noticeably, "I have been warned that you Amber Princes are a devious lot. Is there some secret purpose behind your flattery, sir?"

"None beyond the obvious, milady."

She bursts into a dazzling smile, "Good. I will accept it in that same spirit."

On the second day we spent almost two hours talking to a cabinet maker about the techniques used to bring out the grain in cherry wood. Afterward when I ask her why, Lotania laughs and explains that she is working on a painting in which a cherry wood serving board was part of the foreground.

When we get back home I ask her to show me the piece. She is reluctant at first. Lotania is apparently the sort of artist who doesn't like to have works in progress viewed, but I eventually charm her into letting me into her studio. The painting in question is quite good, but based on what the cabinet maker had told us the grain in the serving board is off. We discuss which combinations of color might reproduce the effect the cabinet maker described and I can literally feel the creative tension grow within Lotania.

Finally she gives me a pleading look that reminds me of a little girl trying to convince her parents to let her open just one present on Christmas Eve and asks, "Would you mind?"

I smile and shake my head. I haven't watched anyone else paint in a long time. It reminds me of simpler days.

After a time one of her servants asks us if we'd like our meal served in the studio. Can it be that late already? I have become so engrossed in

watching Lotania work that I completely lost track of the time.

We eat a light meal and discuss the rest of Lotania's work.

When she is at last satisfied with the serving board's finish Lotania puts down her brushes and turns to me, "You have me at a disadvantage sir, you have now seen the body of my work both finished and unfinished, you have gazed into my soul. But I know nothing about you save your words, and words are a poor measure of an artist's soul."

"Actually I am poet and something of a songwriter so...."

She scowls, "You mock me!"

I intercept her attempt to turn her back on me in mid-revolution, "Only a little. Walk with me a moment."

"I will not be made light of."

"Please?"

She frowns but allows me to steer her outside. Pegs is nibbling on a rose bush in the garden when we arrive.

He lifts his head and looks up in our direction as we enter, 'Say, not bad!' A pedal falls from his mouth and flutters to the ground, 'The lady, not the roses.'

'I know what you meant, lecher.'

'You wound me, sir. And might I ask whose hand that is she's holding?'

'If you can behave for five minutes I'll introduce you.'

He nods his head several times, 'I look forward to being on a first name basis with your new lady.'

'She is not my lady, at least, not yet.'

'No?'

'No.'

I smile at Lotania and say, "This is my friend Pegasus who would be more than happy if you would call him Pegs. Pegs this is Lotania."

He snorts, paws the ground with one leg, and spreads his wings. Sometimes I think he practices that Bloody dramatic snap of his wings when I'm not around.

I have long suspected that Pegs is attracted to beautiful women, and that his showing off like this is a form of coming on to them. Though what he would do with any interested enough to return one of his passes is beyond me.

Pegs sends, 'Beauty as rare as yours is always a pleasure to behold, milady,' and I can tell from the Lotania's expression that she hears his mental voice. Now I know he is flirting. He usually only talks to me. Sending his thoughts to others normally requires more mental effort than he likes to summon.

I glare at Pegs and think, 'Time to get down to business.'

While Pegs reluctantly turns his attention back to the rose bushes I explain to Lotania, "Pegs can retrieve some of my work or he can take us both to my studio in Paris."

"I love Paris."

I shrug, "My Paris is a Shadow of Amber, of course."

"Could we back by morning?"

I look at Pegs. He snorts and nods his head.

"If we leave now," I explain while mounting Pegs and offering her a hand up. She accepts my arm and slides up behind me.

Pegs takes off, Lotania slips her arms around my waist, and we are airborne.

In the air Lotania snuggles against me and shouts, "This is incredible!"

"I've never found anything that quite compares," I shout back over my shoulder.

I could keep going on like this right past morning! I am half tempted to let Pegs Shift us the entire way but I did promise Lotania that we would be back before morning. With a tinge of regret for a moment lost I concentrate on my Trump of the Grove and a rainbow appears before us. Pegs dives into it and an instant later we are in the night sky above Amber.

I point to Kolvir, "Amber."

The wind whips at my words but Lotania turns in the proper direction, "Its beautiful!"

"Perhaps we can visit when we have more time."

I summon another Rainbow and Pegs dives though again. Several Shifts by Pegs later and the three of us are in my loft on the Left Bank. Pegs tries to excuse himself before taking off for airier climes, but Lotania is already too lost my collection of nudes to notice.

'Don't do anything I wouldn't do, Cory.'

'Wouldn't or can't?'

He snorts and disappears.

Sometime later Lotania turns to me and asks, "Did you know them all?"

"Know?" I try to pretend I don't understand her question.

She nods.

"Not all of them, no."

"Hmmm, let me guess. This one," she points to a painting on the wall. "The back two in that stack," she indicates a stack of paintings leaning against the wall, "the twins, and the big one in the golden frame." She points to a painting of Mavis, "the crooked one."

I shrug, "I never could get the Bloody thing to hang straight, it must be the wall."

"More likely the frame."

"How did you know?"

"They have more pith, than the others."

"Pith?"

"An inner quality the rest lack. It is almost as if you captured a bit the subject."

"The way one does with Trumps?"

She nods.

"I knew nothing of Trumps back then."

"That is obvious. What are these?" She asks while fingering her way through another stack, "Landscapes?"

I shrug, "A fellow's got to rest sometime doesn't he?"

She laughs and asks for a cup of coffee, I make us some, and we spend what is left of the night comparing styles and talking shop.

At dawn we decide to crash in Paris and fly back to Bright after getting some sleep. My guest goes to bed but I can't sleep. Lotania fills my thoughts making it all but impossible to relax. Eventually I decide that at least part of her secret is that Lotania is genuinely interested in people and what they do. She just plain likes people and honestly seems to enjoy their company and they, in turn, enjoy hers. After all, everyone, even wayward wandering Princes of Amber, like for their talents and opinions to be valued.

By the time Pegs brings us back to Rotel I know that I want Lotania. In the past such a desire has usually been enough to bring the subject into my waiting arms. Lotania, unfortunately, seems immune to those sorts of influences.

The next morning we stop at a silversmith's and spend an hour or so talking about the proper taper of fork tines. Afterward Lotania has the same look in her eyes as she did when 'we' painted the serving board. This time she takes my hand and practically drags me back to her studio.

I wish I could get her to show as much interest in me as she does that Bloody painting!

An hour later a single fork rests on her cherry wood serving board. The fork is perfect, precisely the way the silversmith described it and even though its part in the portrait of a young girl preparing dinner is inconsequential I cannot help but admire its perfection almost as much as I admire the artist who created it.

After an early dinner Lotania announces that we will be attending a friend's opening tonight.

When I protest that everyone in Rotel is one of her friends, she smiles and explains, "You met Gwendolyn the first night you were here. She was the blonde who agreed with you about modern art." She hands me a box, "I bought you a tux, I hope it fits."

Considering how few concessions she makes to her feminine side I was quite surprised to discover that Lotania enjoys shopping for clothes. She apparently enjoys dresses if not dressing.

I am just about to tie my bow tie when she shows up in my bedroom in nothing but a cream colored camisole and demands that I decide which gown she should wear. Though both are lovely, I choose the dark brown over the pale gray. After my choice is made she slips into the dress and requests that I hook her up in back. I hate eye hooks but fastening them is another of those skills that Flora insisted I cultivate. As I secure the back of the gown I cannot help but notice what a slender waist Lotania has.

"You're quite deft with awkward dress fastenings."

"It is a skill I acquired."

"In your Amber ladies' bedrooms no doubt?"

I laugh, "Hardly."

"With whom, then, if I might be so bold as to ask?"

"You won't believe me."

"Try me."

"With my Aunt."

"Your right. I don't believe you. And why should I? You Amber Princes are all notorious liars!"

We both laugh.

At the opening Lotania rarely leaves my arm. Even though I have known her a brief time only she feels very natural there. She deftly guides us though the gallery with the same sort of ease that she displayed when moving about the crowded country market. As she introduces me around I pour on the charm, using every trick Flora taught me about surviving such affairs. I am introduced as 'My friend Carolán', something that would have secretly pleased me had I not already come to the conclusion that everyone in Rotel is Lotania's friend.

Her first and greatest love is art. I realized that during our first conversation, but after watching her with Rotel's 'In Crowd', I am beginning to wonder if perhaps it 'tisn't all she cares about. Is there any room in her life for anything else? For anyone else?

On the fourth day we talk with a canvas maker, a man who collects natural pigments and sells them to paint makers, and a professional model and the artist who is painting her. By midday I'm beginning to give into my frustration. I've done everything I can think of short of embracing her to get her to pay attention to me and nothing seems to work. Maybe it isn't me, I tell myself. Maybe it isn't anything I've done or not done. Maybe I'm just fighting a losing battle. Maybe there just isn't room for anyone or anything in Lotania's life besides art. Maybe art is the only thing that matters to her.

We pass by a park and when I suggest we stop to 'rest our feet' Lotania agrees. We buy two ice cream cones and while we are sitting on a bench eating them Lotania spots a young girl playing with a puppy. She invites the girl to join us. Her name is Mary and the puppy is a present from her parents on her birthday. We spent the next two hours playing with Mary and her birthday puppy and the light in Lotania's eyes when she plays with the dog is as bright as his owner's. 'Tis then I realize how wrong I was. This woman loves life far too much to let anything, even her work, completely obsess her.

'Ye're just feel'n sorry for yerself, boyo. Now quit yer feck'n pouting and get the Bloody job done already!' I chide myself.

On the fifth day we stop at an orphanage and Lotania draws caricatures of

the children. Even though cartooning is not exactly my strong suit I join in. Several pads and a set of colored pencils later every kid has his or her own drawing.

Lotania is as comfortable with children as she is with adults. How does she do it? How does she get everyone, even children, to like her?

Is it because she is beautiful? Is it because she is kind and never acts abusive toward anyone? Is it because she seems totally unaware of her position and treats even the lowliest street hawker like an equal. Is it...

Sweet Fucking Jesus!

Its not her!

'Tisn't the Bloody Trump Mistress of Rotel who needs to feel wanted. Everyone loves her already. The one who needs to be held is the little girl, the one who feels like a square peg in a round hole, that pre-teen who believes that no one thinks she's pretty but her father, that teenager in such a hurry to become a woman!

At breakfast on the sixth day I ask Lotania, "Will you pose for me?"

"When?"

"Today. Right now!"

"Now? But I had pla..."

"Forget about them. I've seen enough of Rotel for a while. Right now I want to paint. I want to paint you."

She points to herself, "Me?"

I look around the room, "Tis there anyone else about?"

"Why?"

I open my hands, "Look at these."

She studies my hands for several minutes.

"Did you notice the barely perceptible shake?"

She nods.

"That tension needs release. I saw it in you the other day, can you not recognize it in me now?"

Her big dark gray eyes lock onto my emerald ones, neither of us breathes for several moments. Finally she sighs and says, "Where?"

"Your father's study"

"Why there?"

I shrug, "Feels right."

"All right."

We walk to the study in silence. When we arrive she begins to step out of her clothes.

"Nude?" I ask as the last of her clothes hit the floor.

She smiles, "Your portraits are beautiful but your nudes are inspired. Don't worry about me, I've posed this way many times."

"For your Father?"

She shakes her head, "No silly, at school. You don't think art students can afford to pay the prices professional models command in Rotel, do you?"

Where?"

"On the old leather couch, I think."

She assumes a reclining pose on the couch, "We all took turns posing. I've been told I have a natural talent for it."

"Yes, the brown leather is perfect against your skin."

"This position doesn't feel right," she complains.

"Then use some of that natural talent, get comfortable."

"There."

"Perfect. Don't move"

As soon as I pick up the brush something I still don't quite understand happens. We connect. After all this time, bang just like that. Suddenly there was just me, the canvas, and Lotania. For a long time nothing else mattered, nothing else was real.

This time when I looked for her Trump Image I saw them all, the beautiful woman, the brilliant student, the perfect model, the philosopher, the scholar, the artist, the Trump Mistress adored by everyone, and the girl begging to be held and told she didn't have to be any of those things to be loved. That all she had to be was herself.

I finally saw Lotania.

On the seventh day we rested. In truth neither of us got much rest, even though we spent the entire day in bed.

During one of our least restful moments Lotania called me Cory, it hardly seemed worth bothering about at that particular moment, but later when we were actually relaxing I asked her about it.

"You called me Cory?"

She nods and playfully runs her fingers through my hair.

"Why?"

"It seemed liked the right place and time. Did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all, Cory is what the people who are closest to me call me..."

She presses her body tightly against my own, "Aren't we close?"

"Tis just that I don't remember ever mentioning that to you."

"I must have heard it somewhere then."

"Where?"

"Is this something we have to talk about now, Cor...darling?" she emphasizes her point with a long deep kiss.

Later I'm going to have to have a talk with Pegs, much later!

The next day we are back in her father's study. I spent a long time staring at my previous work. Finally with a shrug I begin to slap a Gesso base over the entire thing.

"What's wrong?" asks Lotania as she drops her pose.

"Everything. There was too much missing. Too many things I didn't see. There was no..."

"Pith."

I nod, "This time I want more of your back. Yes, yes. That's perfect. Now don't move."

I was aware that Lotania's waist was small for her medium build but discovering the sensuous curve of her back came as a most pleasant surprise. The beautifully delicate taper of the small of her back is by far her most interesting female feature. A nude that didn't give it prominent exposure has robbed its audience of an opportunity to glimpse real art.

This Trump grows more demanding with each stroke of my brush. Not only do I have to capture the many complexities of Lotania's Trump Image but I also have to convey her personality. Normally an artist can bring out a lot of his subject's personality though their clothing and props, but because this piece is a nude I have few such crutches to work with.

And then there is her hair, with its damned elusive gray highlights. Lotania's hair is her one concession to female vanity. She wears it long and lets it hang between her shoulder blades, but makes sure the ends are cut so that it hangs evenly without a single hair being out of place. So many aspects of her persona seem somehow tangled up in her hair that rendering it has become the most difficult part of this piece.

This is not a Trump that will be mastered in two or three days.

"It is of no consequence of what parents any man is born, so that he be a man of merit."

— Horace

After three days of solid sitting Lotania begins to complain that her muscles ache. I offer to rub the kinks out.

She flashes a grateful smile and rolls over onto her stomach, "Start low, that three quarter twist is murder on the lower back."

"How's this? Better?"

"Ahh, much. But lower still."

"Here?"

"Mmmm, now a little harder, Darling.

The muscles in her back are very tight but I can feel them begin to unknot as I knead.

"Mmmm, perfect. Cory, do you think we could..."

Lotania is stopped in mid-sentence by a flare of Pattern power. The working is not very subtle. As it washes over us, like a wave crashing onto the beach, Lotania reaches for her dressing gown. She has just barely slipped into it when Morgan steps into the room.

What was that he stepped through? Not a Trump gate, certainly. 'Tis also different than the usual way the Pattern moves one about. What is he up to? Aside from showing off, that is.

Could his gateway actually be a hole between Shadows? He holds the whatever-it-is open, long enough for me to examine it with Trump Sight.

But my extra sense is little help, there is nothing there save bound Pattern energies. I'm sure Morgan refers to it as a Pattern Gate, but more than anything else it resembles a tear in reality.

I give him a wry smile, "You could have knocked."

"Sorry, I thought I did."

"Is that what you call that?"

He shrugs and turns to Lotania. As they size one another up, their eyes make contact.

This should be interesting I think to myself.

Their eyes lock and they stand frozen like statues, for long enough that it begins to make me uncomfortable. I must confess, though, that I am somewhat pleased to see Lotania hold her own against the dread Morgan Stare.

Finally I break their contest of wills by announcing, "This is my cousin, Morgan of Amber."

The two combatants seem startled by the sound of my voice. Almost in unison they blink, take a breath, then turn and look at me, as if I'm the one who has just appeared out of nowhere.

Morgan smiles and says, "A Pleasure."

Lotania offers Morgan her hand, "The pleasure is mine, I have heard so much about you from Cory."

Morgan's eyebrow arches at her use of that particular diminutive of my name. He knows I never let anyone call me that, other than Fiona and Flora.

"Nothing good I am sure."

"That would depend on your perspective."

"And Carolan's, no doubt."

Lotania nods and gives him a small smile.

"And this is Lotania, the Trump Mistress, here in Rotel."

Morgan looks at the easel and nods approvingly, "I can see that the two of you were working, nevertheless I must beg from you an indulgence. Might I borrow my cousin for a moment, good lady?"

Lotania smiles again, "Surely," she stretches, "A break from all this sitting would be most welcome."

Morgan opens another of his 'tears' and steps through, while practically dragging me along, "Thank you milady, I'll return him shortly."

When the tear closes behind us I glare and say, "Thank you milady? What about me? What if didn't want to come?"

Morgan smiles, "So what's the story with the beautiful lady, 'Cory'?"

"None of your Bloody business!"

"Ahh," he notes with an understanding nod. "Funny, I'd not have thought her your type. Too..."

"Capable?"

He nods, "That, and she's more woman that I'd have thought you could handle, little brother. Now before you go getting your ass up in the air, I'm

just trying to say that your interest seems a little out of character. When did you stop chasing after damsels and such and start paying attention to real women?"

I try to give him one of his own glares, "You had something important to talk to me about?"

He shakes his head, "Something to show you."

"Look Morgan. what's this all about?"

"My family."

"Your what?"

"You know, wife, kids...family."

"You have a...," I start in total disbelief.

He smiles and nods, "...family."

"Sweet Jesus! Talk about out-of-character. A family. You?" I shake my head as if it will clear away the disbelief. Finally I look him in the eyes and ask, "Why?"

He laughs, "My! Aren't we the suspicious one. I could ask you the same thing about your lady friend. I wonder, who chose whom and why?"

"You already tried. How about answering my question."

"Like you've answered mine."

"Look Morgan, we are supposed to be friends, is all this preamble really necessary? If you didn't want to show me whatever it is you've hidden out here, you wouldn't have yanked me out of Rotel, right?"

"Caine was right, you really are no fun at all. Of course, if you weren't the way you are, I couldn't trust you with this secret, could I?"

I give him my best get-to-the-point look.

"I've a wife and children..."

"How'd you manage that? You've only been gone two weeks."

"Time differential."

"But the only Shadows where the differentials are that extreme are in the Courts of..."

"Jesus Morgan! What's this all about?"

"They're not yet ready for contact with our kind. They will not be ready for Amber or the Pattern until they have mastered their own powers."

"Powers?"

"They're still young and groping about to discover who they are. Surely you can remember what it was like to be a teenager?"

I nod, "Unlike most of you, it wasn't all that long ago for me."

He nods, "Before I take you to my family, I want you to promise me that you will not reveal yourself in any way. Only observe from a distance. I don't want them to see the 'bigger picture' until I judge them ready."

"Why tell me at all?"

"We have yet to successfully deal with Thanos, and there is always the possibility that something might happen to me. I nearly lost myself in the Land of the Dead, for instance. If, for one reason or another, I should fail, I want someone to be in a position to keep an eye on them. And to make sure

they learn of their birthright when the proper time comes."

"Why me?"

"There is no one else in Amber I trust!"

"When you put it that way, I can hardly refuse. Alright. I swear not to reveal Amber or myself to your children until such time are you deem ready, or unless you have been removed from the 'bigger picture'."

"Even then, not until they are ready to master the Pattern."

"Not until I judge them ready to walk the Pattern."

"Good!" He opens another tear and says, "Come then, meet the family." His chest swells with pride and he's grinning like Robert Young. I can hardly believe this is the same man I left a few weeks ago.

We step though the tear and come out in a beautiful pastoral setting. We walk though a babbling brook then come to the edge of a small stand of trees. It reminds me of the Grove of the Unicorn, for some reason I can't explain, though it looks nothing like The Arden.

Morgan points and says, "Look! There's one of my daughters."

The grove is empty, but for a pale white wolf with the blood of a fresh kill on its forepaws and throat.

"Where?"

"There. That is my daughter, Morwenna."

"The wolf? Your daughter is a wolf!"

I look away from the ivory colored animal and back to Morgan. When our eyes come together, I can find no laughter in him. 'Tis no joke.

"Christ Jesus! You can't be serious?"

His hard eyes narrow, "She is the Blood of Amber, the same as you or me."

"I'm sorry Morgan but she is nothing at all like you or me. Look at her, man. She's a Bloody animal."

"The Quinquaran are as intelligent as any humanoid race, and psychically stronger than most."

"That may be but..."

The wolf lays down and its body begins to throb, elongate, and slowly change. A metamorphosis that does not look altogether comfortable for the wolf, and reminds me of the transformation scene in *An American Werewolf in London*, only reversed.

"A Shifter? Damn, Morgan you know how I feel about Shifters."

He grins, "I've always felt that most of your ill-feelings toward shape shifters comes from the fact that you resent Aurelia, and blame her for Dennifer's leaving Amber."

"That's a lie."

He shrugs.

"Change is abhorrent to the Pattern. Changing one's self is something that Lords of Chaos do, not Princes or Princesses of Amber. After your recent experiences you, of all people, should be able to understand that." He seems unplussed by my argument.

"I disagree. Amber is about power and Shape Changing is a manifestation of power. And power, little brother, is meant to be used."

It's slow transformation now complete, the wolf-girl rises with a little grimace and stretches taut muscles that ripple through her body. No longer an animal, Morgan's daughter now stands revealed as a tall, long-legged, rather statuesque young woman.

Her skin is pale, like Morgan's, and makes the scarlet smears of the steaming blood on her firm breasts appear even more vibrant. She turns in our direction and I can see that her nipples are pink, like a redhead's. Just the type I would expect to see on a granddaughter of Brand. Her hair is not Brand's flaming red though. It is the same off-white color as Morgan's, a color that has always reminded me of bleached bones. She also has a feminine version of Morgan's high cheekbones, square jaw, and angular features. There is no doubt in my mind that this particular young woman, whatever else she may be, is Morgan's daughter.

The resemblance is actually uncanny.

She crosses the grove and begins to bathe in a small pool. When she walks she moves naturally without the exaggerated swaying of the hips that women in Shadow use to attract men's attention. This is either a woman who is uninterested in attracting men or one who has had little intercourse with human society. Based on what Morgan has already told me, I suspect the latter.

Though I am in no mood to admit it to Morgan, his daughter is quite beautiful. I find the fact rather surprising, considering how strong the resemblance between them is. Despite her almost total lack of feminine graces, I find that she reminds me of Denna, more than I would like.

We watch her bathe for a while. I'm beginning to wonder why Morgan has brought me here. Does our voyeurism have a purpose, or has he lived among these psi-wolves for so long that he has forgotten the effect naked young ladies bathing have on young gentlemen like myself. Though he has only been gone a couple of weeks by my reckoning, his daughter looks to be nineteen or twenty years old. That is a long time to live as an animal, even for a Prince of Amber.

I turn to him and ask, "Are there others?"

"Five."

"Five?"

He nods, "We had a litter of five, yes."

"A litter of.... Sweet Jesus, Morgan..."

For several moments I can think of nothing to say, then the words just rush out on their own, "You fucked a Bloody wolf!"

His eyes narrow and he shoots me with one of his patented glares. It impales me as if I were a butterfly in some collector's display. He holds me thus until a properly dramatic moment has passed, then explains, "I was a wolf myself, at the time."

"Oh, well, as long as you were a Bloody Fucking wolf at the time..."

Unicorn's Horn, man, what could you have been thinking?"

His eyes take on the hardest edge I have ever seen, and his voice grows uncharacteristically quiet, "I need allies to take the Trump Fortress from Thanos. Allies fanatically loyal to me, but nothing else. Allies powerful enough, physically and psychically, to deal with Thanos or any allies he has acquired."

"Thanos, who has the most powerful mind of any of us..." I shrug, "I concede your need to breed psychic warriors, but wolves from Bloody Chaos? Surely you could have found a race more suitable than Bloody Lycanthropes? Something a wee bit less abhorrent to what we are, to what Amber represents."

"You forget about Aurelia. She has sided with Thanos against me once already."

"Aurelia, the Bright shape-shifter..."

He nods.

"Psyche and shapes..."

"The forms of my enemies," he smiles wickedly, "And now the forms of my allies as well."

"You're a cold, calculating bastard, do you know that?"

He smiles.

"You've bred your own children into weapons of destruction."

He shakes his head, "Into warriors capable of slaying my enemies. A warband that will follow me into Hell then fight their way out tooth and claw."

"You've given creatures of Chaos the power to destroy Amber."

"They will not destroy that which is a part of them."

I look him right in the eyes. "There are times when I don't understand you at all."

He shrugs.

I sigh, "I'm going back to Rotel. When you think your 'warriors' are finally ready for human contact, let me know."

I activate my memorized image of Lotania. She is a long way off and it takes my full concentration to establish the contact. She smiles when she sees me. We embrace through the Gate and I will myself to be with her. As the Trump effect washes over me, I can't help thinking, 'How can Morgan expect any child of his blood to blindly follow anyone, even him?'

I have not been back at Lotania's very long when Adrian stops by and offers to take me to Detroit to see the Family business. He seems to be more or less in charge of its general operations. He infers that this is because he is the oldest, and that it is something like being the Heir to the Throne. But I suspect that it is because no one else wants the Bloody job.

I could care less about such things, but it would be most undiplomatic to inform Corwin's first born that I think he's boring, so I let him arrange a visit. I'm no longer in the mood to paint anyway. If I didn't know better, I'd

suspect that Lotania arranged all these distractions just to get out of sitting today.

Adrian takes me to Gigantek Corp World Headquarters in Detroit Shadow. Shortly after we arrive he introduces me to Gigantek CEO Freeman Mills. It only takes me a few minutes to realize who really runs the family business.

Mills is an interesting individual. He is obviously brilliant, but it is difficult to judge just how brilliant because he never seems to be thinking about the matter at hand. I'll wager he's an excellent Chess player though, because his mind seems to forever be three moves ahead of his body. You can almost see the wheels inside the wheels inside the wheels as they whirl around inside his head. He is clever and manipulative but, unlike Caine, he doesn't seem very good at hiding his abilities. That or he is playing a game that is far too clever for me to digest.

The other unusual thing about Mills is that, for some reason I can't quite explain, his impeccable three piece suit doesn't 'feel' right. It almost seems that he missed his true calling somewhere along the line and that, despite all his success, he has never completely adjusted to the business world. In this he reminds me a bit of Bill Roth, the lawyer with the soul of a swashbuckler.

At lunch I express an interest in the Shadow Cars Gigantek produces and Mills offers to give me one. Before we have finished dessert a young man in a three piece suit pulls up to the restaurant with a British racing green Jaguar XJS.

I can't help but smile when the CEO of Detroit's biggest car producer hands me the keys to a British import. The irony, however, seems lost on both Adrian and Mills.

After lunch I thank them for the gift and drive back to Rotel. Adrian assures me that all I have to do is follow the signs along the Shadowway.

I'm not sure that I like the way things operate here in Bright. Maybe its just prejudice on my part but I'm not sure that things like Trumps and the power to move through Shadow should be available to just anyone. It worries me a little to think of what might happen if just anybody could get in one of these cars and drive to Amber.

The first thing I do when I get back to Rotel is give away the Jaguar. Its a beautiful car but it came from Family. From cousins that are basically unknowns. Remember Rule Number One, it has a codicil that says: *Always look horses, too freely given, in the mouth.*

When I get the chance I intend to go out and buy a Shadow car of my own. Preferably a used one purchased with cash.

I throw down my brush. Leave the Bloody thing alone! 'Tis finished!

This is the hardest part of painting. Knowing when to quit. Accepting the fact that you have done all you are capable of doing. I call Lotania over with a gesture.

She looks at the piece a long time.

"Does it have pith?"

She nods and kisses me. When our lips part she whispers in my ear, "How about another back rub, Darling?"

I smile, lift her into my arms, and carry her upstairs.

"Happiness in this world, when it comes, comes incidentally. Make it the object of pursuit, and it leads to a wild-goose chase and is never attained."

– Nathaniel Hawthorne

There is a knock on my cell door. It is Roger with my breakfast. As I eat I look down at the stack I just completed. You didn't need to know all that about Rotel, did you now? 'Tis just the closer I get to Llewella's death the harder it gets to bang out any pertinent words.

Look, I'm doing the Bloody best I can. This is turning out to be a lot harder than I thought. Okay, okay, as soon as I finish my eggs I'll get back to the Bloody point...

I slipped out of bed early this morning so I could take a solitary walk and do some thinking. Lotania is still sound asleep. I have been in Rotel for nearly a month. My holiday is over, Lotania's Trump is finished, and I have been gone too long from Amber. So what am I doing here, in a Shadow of Bright? I'll be damned if I know!

Painting Lotania's Trump has let me see her. Not as I thought she was. Not even as I wanted her to be, but the way she is. I know now that many of my early estimates were overly simplistic or completely wrong. She is far more complex and multi-dimensional than I once imagined.

She is fanatical about her art, this is true, but she also has a passion for books. She reads almost anything. Fiction, non-fiction; history, philosophy, hard and theoretical science, even economics. She seems to enjoy understanding the hows and whys of things.

She also takes a great deal of pleasure in her meals. Thus far I have managed to avoid going head to head with her at meal time, but she appears to understand at least as much as I, if not more, about gourmet foods and their preparation.

She loves clothes. I might even go so far as to say she has a passion for clothes. I'm not sure that I would describe her as a clothes horse, because she seems more fond of owning clothes than wearing them. But if I wanted to give her a present, it wouldn't be art or books, it would be 'interesting' clothing.

The more I learn about Lotania the more she intrigues me. I like her as much, or more, than any woman I've ever know. Bloody Hell, maybe I actually love her. Maybe that's it. Maybe that's what's holding me here. When you love somebody you don't just walk away, right?

'You don't love her, Cory.'

I am not surprised to hear Pegs' mental voice. He always seems to know when I need him even if its just to talk. 'Oh yeah! And how would you know? Since when did having wings and being able to shift Shadow make you omniscient.'

'I'm not omniscient, but we both know that I can sense things.'

'I've been extremely happy these past weeks.'

'I'm not denying that, but what about Alea?'

'Alea?'

'Doesn't she make you happy?'

'Alea always makes me happy. When I am with her I am content and whatever is troubling me just seems to melt away, even if it is only for a little while. Whenever Amber becomes too much to digest I have always been able to retreat to Aquarella and into her arms.'

"Do you love Alea, Cory?"

"I... Until I met Lotania, yes."

"Then why'd you leave her?"

"I've been back, often!"

He snorts and nods his head, "But I thought you just said you don't walk away from the one you love."

'No, you don't.'

'Then you don't really love her do you?'

'Sweet Jesus Pegs! What's ye Bloody point? Why the 3rd degree?'

'Ask yourself this one question, Cory. Are your feelings for Lotania any stronger than they are for Alea?'

I glare at him for a long time, then finally I shrug and confess, 'Maybe. Alea is a boy's fantasy. Lotania is women. Someone you could spend your life with.'

'I'm not denying that you care for Lotania, Cory, and I can sense that she makes you happy. Your relationship with her is good. Not even a Prince of Amber stays a boy forever and I think that Lotania can give you things you've never needed before. I even like her, myself.'

"Yes, you could love her. Hell, maybe you even should. I just don't think that you do, at least not now, and we both know why."

'Fiona, why do you haunt me so' I think to myself while turning my back on my friend. How long will I keep letting the things I want slip away while I try to figure out what, if anything, exists between us? After a minute I turn back to Pegs, "Now you're not playing fair."

"Since when did anyone in Amber play 'fair'?"

"We're in Bright."

He gives me the mental equivalent of a shrug, "Same difference, far as I can tell."

'Dammit Pegs, something is holding me here. If its not Lotania, what is it?'

'I believe your reluctance to leave this place is based on a foreboding of

sorts. A premonition of things to come.'

Whenever I look into his eyes I can't help thinking they hold more intelligence than a horse's should, but then he is a Greek god, 'You've felt it too?'

Pegs snorts and nods.

'Something is waiting out there for me, something bad.'

'I'm sorry Cory, I didn't mean to hurt you just now but you're my friend and I couldn't let you waste your life hiding from some unknown fear and telling yourself it's because you love Lotania. That wouldn't be fair to you or to the Lady.'

'Where?'

Pegs nods, 'It's too vague for me to pinpoint, but it is out there waiting. You have two choices Cory...'

'No. You're wrong 'tis but one.'

'Which is?'

'To face whatever it is head on, like a proper Prince of Amber.'

'We will face it together then, my friend.'

'But first I have to say good-bye to Lotania.'

'Of course, kiss her once for me.'

"Mark this place in your memory, my friend. I think we'll have reason to come back this way.'

He snorts and nods, "Good."

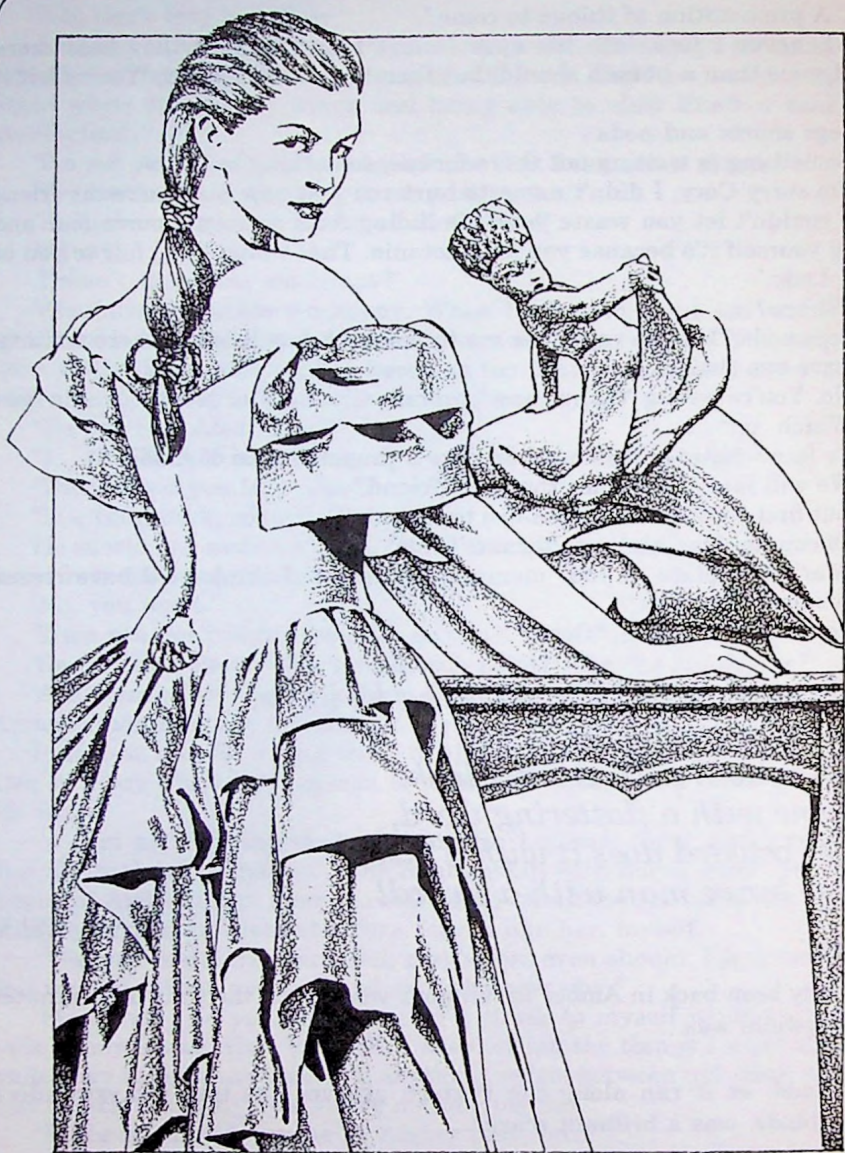
*Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!*

— Oscar Wilde

I'd barely been back in Amber for an hour when I got the Call. Ten minutes later Llewella was...

Her blood, as it ran along the Pattern grooves cut into Grayswandir's silvery blade, was a brilliant scarlet...

Too late! Everything I did was too late! I was too late to stop my thrust, too late to avoid seeing the surprise in her big emerald eyes, too late to avoid the spray of blood as Grayswandir slips from her throat...



Llewella's death was pointless. Meaningless. It will yield no more answers than my life did.

When I started this *confession*, I thought that it needed doing. And I thought that I was strong enough to do it. But I can't face Llewella's death again. I won't.

What Bloody Fucking good will reliving it do anyway?

We've touched on all the major events of my early life, my adventures in Amber, even my walk through the Bloody Fucking Land of the Dead, and for what? What answers did we learn? What truths were revealed?

Will my reliving Llewella's death, yet again, satisfy anything other than your own Bloody voyeurism?

Where are all the answers, Damn you? Where?

Was it wrong to strive toward a heroic ideal? Is it wrong to love and be loved? Is it wrong to have friends? To have noble aspirations? To hope for better things?

No. Caine is wrong! He has to be. Not even the stain of Llewella's blood on my hands can make me begin to think and act like that Bloody bastard. There *is* a better way! There has to be. There has to...

Damn your eyes! Don't you understand? I still hear the hiss of her breath escaping from the almost surgical cut Grayswandir made in her throat. I still smell her blood.

Llewella's death was pointless. Meaningless. It will yield no more answers than my life did.

There is but one answer and that is that there are no answers!

I told you early on that this exercise was never meant for you. It's still not. When I started, I thought maybe it was for me, but I can see now that I'll find no answers here. At least not before the coming Dawn.

Then why go on?

I don't really know. Maybe for her...

The Trump call is from Titania of Bright. I had just recently learned that, in addition to being the mother of Brand's mad son Thanos, Titania is also my aunt Llewella. I trust Llewella, but Titania's relationship to Thanos worries me. The fact that Thanos possesses a mind more powerful than Harlan's, and controls Brand's Trump fortress merely makes him dangerous. But the fact that he is as mad as his father makes him a Bloody menace. I put the call on hold and try to arrange for some backup. Unfortunately no one is about. Hurriedly, I scan my Trumps and eventually manage to grab Harlan. He agrees to help.

Even though Harlan has the most powerful mind in Amber, I'd have preferred someone a bit more solid behind me. But Titania's Call is becoming more insistent with each passing second. My fledgling Trump abilities quickly prove inadequate at holding her off. There was no time, Harlan will just have to do.

We answer the call. Llewella is not alone. She is with her two sons, Thanos and Solem. 'Tis funny, but I would never have thought Llewella to be the motherly type. And I certainly can't imagine her with Brand. Corwin, perhaps, but Brand? Bloody Hell, those two hated one another worse than Bloody cats and dogs.

There is a conversation. Llewella wants me to join her and Thanos in what she describes as, 'the defense of Amber and my father.' I ask from whom and she says from Caine. While I am more than ready to accept the worst from Caine, her explanation just doesn't feel right. I try to stall them by saying that Caine can not hurt my father as he was already dead. It is meant as an evasion, and nothing more, but my words set Thanos off.

He begins to scream, "It's him! The bastard son of the prophecy! The one who is lost! He must be killed!

Llewella looks at him and shakes her head.

"Mother, he's a danger to our plans! He must not be allowed to fulfill the prophecy. He must be destroyed!"

Llewella denied him.

Thanos turned on Solem, "We must kill him, now!"

While Solem gives his mother a confused look, I looked over at Harlan and noticed that he seems preoccupied by something.

Things began to happen very fast after that.

With Thanos' rage and hate pouring over us through the Trump, Harlan pulls out of the contact. I scream at the ghost of his fading Trump image, but he can not or will not hear me.

Deserted, I stand alone against the mad son of the Mad Prince.

I try to break the contact, but Thanos is too quick and too powerful. I try every trick I know, but despite all my newfound Trump skills I cannot break his hold on my mind. I try to Trump out of his vise-like mental grip, but find myself held fast by bands of rainbow brightness.

I become desperate, having failed to run away or even hide from Thanos' mind. I try to summon assistance, without even considering the consequences to whoever I might reach. Again my powers prove inadequate.

In a moment of utter despair I realize that the Master of Brand's Trump Fortress is unlikely to be foiled by the few feeble tricks I might muster.

Brand's words flash like lightning through my mind, 'He'll not be stopped by idealistic young boys... If he's gained control of my fortress, then not even Morgan has the power to stop him.' For some reason my memories seem to infuriate Thanos even more. He begins to scream at Titania and Solem for my head, and he begins to pound me with his psyche in wave after wave of force.

"I push against his mental grip, feeling for a weakness. There are none. I am bound by his iron will. Somewhere inside me a voice screams that I was in mortal danger.

Never before have I faced such a situation. Psychically and magically

helpless. I'm afraid that I've never been good at being helpless. I begin to operate on an almost instinctual level. There seems but one venue left to me. One that has never failed me before.

Suddenly Grayswandir is in my hand. I glance at the glint of the Pattern on its blade and I know that I have to act instantly before my own mind betrays me. I slip into a lunge and Grayswandir's point flies towards Thanos' throat.

I watch in horror as Grayswandir pierces Llewella's white throat rather than Thanos' tanned one.

There is a keening wail and the rainbow chains that bind me swirl and fade. As I tighten my grip to withdraw Grayswandir it occurs to me that, if I leave the sword buried in her throat, our Family's amazing recuperative abilities might save Llewella. I could just let go. Let go and leave Grayswandir for Thanos. Give one of the three Artifacts of Power to an out of control madman, who is already master of the Trump Fortress.

For a moment our eyes met, Llewella's are full of surprise. And something else I can't read. What she sees in mine I'll never know. My decision made, I close my eyes and pull.

That is all there is to tell. I wish I could present Llewella's death in a more precise fashion. But even now, days later, I still do not understand what happened. Why was it Llewella and not Thanos who heard Grayswandir's death song? I've asked myself that question over and over, but I have no answer.

These words are few and feeble and do no justice to my aunt, but they are all I have. Whenever I close my eyes and try to remember, all I can see are her eyes, all I can hear is a hiss of air, and all I can feel is the horrifying warmth of her blood as it splatters on my face.

"It is forbidden to kill; therefore all murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets."

- Voltaire

Harlan comes running down the stairs. As soon as I spy him I see red. When he gets within arms reach I slap him, as hard as I can.

He staggers, grabs his face, and yells in pain and surprise. "Damn! Carolán! I think you broke my cheek."

"You Bastard. Where the Bloody Hell were you when I needed you?"

"What have my parents got to do with you breaking my face?"

"I've killed Llewella, damn you!"

His eyes grow wide with surprise and just a little fear, "Llewella? What for?"

I grab him and shake him with all my strength, "It was a Bloody fucking accident, dammit!"

"Hey, that hurts."

I twist his shirt up in my fist.

"Carolan I think you're choking me."

I tighten my grip and lift his feet off the ground, 'Urk, ye...sss yo...our definite...ly cho...oking me."

Morgan Patterns in. He looks at us and says, "Good you're both here. I could use some help."

Harlan who is beginning to turn red says, "So...oo cou...ld I."

Morgan stalks over to us, he watches me choke Harlan a moment then frowns and says, "Let go of him Carolan. I've something important for both of you to do."

The sound of Morgan's voice shatters my rage. I glare up into Harlan's face for several heart beats.

Harlan gasps out, "What'd I do?"

Like a storm blowing over in a high wind, the red mist passes from my vision.

As the pounding in my temples begins to abate, I give Harlan a final glare and toss him to Morgan, "You want him, he's yours."

Morgan neatly side-steps my human projectile and Harlan ends up in a heap at his feet. Air whooshes back into his lungs as he manages to pick himself up and dust himself off with as much dignity as he can muster.

A white haired youth steps through the Pattern Gate Morgan is apparently holding open. He looks at Morgan and says, "Are they all this crazy?" Then he shrugs and says, "Well, you did say it would be interesting."

I look at Morgan and say, "Llewella is dead."

Morgan looks at the stranger, who quite obviously is a brother of the were-girl I saw earlier, and says, "There has been a change of plans. Go back and tell the others they will have to wait."

The stranger scowls at Morgan and starts to say something, but apparently thinks better of it at the last moment. He spins angrily about and steps through the Pattern Gate in a very loud silence. It is easy enough to believe that this too is one of Morgan's children.

After the Pattern Gate closes Morgan shrugs and says, "The three of us will have to do."

I brief Morgan on what has just happened. He seems to have absorbed the fact that Llewella is dead. That I have killed her, but he's just not interested in the details, at least not at this time.

Morgan wants to confront Dameon. He claims Dameon is a traitor to Amber who has tried to kill him more than once. He wants us to back him up him while he confronts Dameon through the Trumps.

I try to tell Morgan not to expect much help from Harlan but he isn't interested in what I have to say. It is clear that he has a hard-on for Dameon

and, when Morgan gets in one of these moods, nothing else matters.

The pounding in my head is gone. It has been replaced by a draining weakness that seems to have sapped away my will.

Normally I would not give in to Morgan so easily, but right now it just doesn't seem to matter. I reluctantly agree to assist him in confronting Dameon, but only after he promises that there will be no more killing.

Morgan and Harlan begin to talk, but their words seem very far away. I think I might be going into shock.

The next thing I remember is Morgan screaming at Dameon about some Bloody atomic bomb.

Dameon glares at Morgan, "I am no more a Traitor to Amber than you are!"

"I am loyal to the Throne."

Dameon laughs in Morgan's face, "You don't even know the meaning of the word. The only loyalty you've ever known has been to Morgan!"

"Whereas you and yours remain loyal to Random."

"My mother swore no false oaths to Random. Deirdre never renounced her legal claims to the Throne of Amber. It is her birthright not Random's. Hell, we don't even know who his mother was, let alone if Oberon ever married her. He has no rightful claim. My mother, on the other hand, is the legitimate daughter of Oberon's first legally binding marriage. The Throne belongs to her."

"But Random is the choice of the Unicorn," I try to interject.

Morgan sneers at a Dameon, looks from me to Harlan and back to me again. "There, you have heard the Treason he speaks for yourselves."

As he addresses us Morgan draws a pistol similar to the rifle Benedict took from him, aims it at Dameon and pulls the trigger.

There is an evil crackling sound, almost like something a giant spark of static electricity might make, and a fluctuation in the local Pattern noticeable even by me.

Dameon's eyes grow wide with horrified realization, his legs buckle and he pitches forward, a smoking hole in its chest where his heart should be. Even before the body strikes the ground the swirling rainbow of colors through which Morgan has shot Dameon breaks apart. Even though we do not see him die, the size of the hole in his chest leaves no doubt as to his ultimate fate. No one is going to regenerate that wound, not even Corwin.

Errant thoughts, that are not my own, flash through my mind. One is from Morgan, and can only be the product of our psyche link, unlike the Rifle which had a Pattern Engine the pistol should not have worked in Amber, this is why Benedict did not bother to take it away. The second is from Harlan, someone beyond our immediate area manipulated Dameon's death. Someone wanted him to die and Harlan did nothing to stop it, even though he might have. Almost as soon as Harlan realizes that I have perceived this thought, our mind link shatters like crystal dropped on a

granite floor.

I turn on Morgan and scream, "Damn you. Damn you to every Hell that exists! You promised. You stood there and Bloody well swore that there'd be no more killing."

As I rant at Morgan, Tromperie slips quietly into my hand. "Dameon was right, you haven't the least concept of honor or loyalty!" I take two steps in Morgan's direction and he aims his energy pistol at my chest.

As the murderous gun barrel swings on me my Ivernian ire seizes complete control.

"Is it so feck'n certain ye are that yer mysterious benefactor wants me as dead as yer man there." As I point at Dameon's body with Tromperie I turn its blade so that the light glints on the Pattern, "Remember *brother*, this Pattern works."

"Stop it both of you!" yells Harlan.

Almost in unison we both turn on him.

He shrinks under our combined glare but before any other words can be spoken, we all receive a Trump call from the King.

He looks at me with sad, tired eyes, and asks, "Did you murder Llewella?"

I look him straight in the eyes and answer, "No."

"I want the three of you here," he commands. "Now!"

As we are being pulled though the Trump I can hear him as he turns to someone and suggests, "Someone had better find Deirdre."

"I hear much of people's calling out to punish the guilty, but very few are concerned to clear the innocent."

— Daniel Defoe

The Trump transit materializes us in Brand's Fortress, where most of the Family seems to be gathered.

Fi magics a banquet table and chairs into one of the larger rooms. We all take our seats. Random is at the head with Benedict and Gérard at his right and left. Next are Osric and Finndo, Corwin and Bleys, Caine and Fiona, Julian and Flora, Deirdre and Merlin, myself and Godfrey, Martin and Adrian, Derek and Herdan, Aurelia and Sauren, Morgan and Solem, Jeremi and an empty place, and finally across from Random, Harlan.

Random rises and addresses the assembly saying, "Three of the Blood of Amber have died this day."

I turn to Martin and quietly asks, "Three?"

"Almost immediately after Llewella died, Aaron Trumped into the Fortress and gunned down his brother Thanos, and then disappeared."

"That is enough!" Random continues.

"Thanos is dead?"

Martin nods and whispers, "Assuming he survives these proceedings, Morgan's prospects would seem to have improved considerably this day, wouldn't you say?"

"I'm not sure I'd like to see Morgan in command of this Fortress." I whisper back.

He nods, "Exactly."

I turn my attention back to Random. He is finishing his speech, "Those who have committed these acts should make their confessions now."

Morgan rises and proceeds to explain his actions. He goes on for quite some time. Apparently he has compiled quite a list of Dameon's treasons to the Crown.

While he speaks Herdan examines the energy pistol. He realizes that it does indeed have a Pattern Engine, but none that he recognizes. Finally it is determined that it is the same type of Engine as Sauren possesses. When questioned, Sauren claims that he purchased his from a wandering peddler.

Deirdre rises and claims the right to slay Morgan.

Morgan looks her in the eye and neither of them flinch or react in any way, until Random says, "No action will be taken by *anyone* until there has been a complete investigation."

Morgan sits down.

It is my turn. I rise and begin to speak, "I have murdered no one..."

Caine laughs out loud. Random glares at him and he grows quiet.

"I do not deny my role in Llewella's death. But it was not my intent that she die this day, her death was an accident, a horrible mistake, one that I do not fully understand even now."

"Accident or not, my mother is just as dead," charges Solem.

I turn to Solem, "I can offer little in defense of my actions save qualities often held in ill regard by this assembly...truth and honor. So be it.

"The truth is simple enough. I was contacted through the Trumps by Llewella who is known as Titania in Bright. I put the call on hold until I could arrange backup. With Harlan's psyche combined with my own, I answered the call. Llewella was with Thanos and Solem. There was some conversation, Llewella wanted me to join her and Thanos in what she described as, 'the defense of Amber and my father' from my uncle Caine."

There is snickering from Caine's place at the table.

I turn to Caine, "There is no love lost between my uncle and myself but something about her words didn't feel right. I tried to stall them. I said Caine cannot hurt my father as he is already dead. The notion that I might be Brand's lost son seemed to enrage Thanos."

I look at Fiona, "My repartee was a mistake. I had intended it to be nothing more than a verbal feint." I sigh. "I just didn't anticipate Thanos' violent reaction. I'm afraid I've never been very good at the word games you all love so much."

I look at Fiona, "I've never been very good at the word games you all

love so much."

Corwin asks, "Do you believe that Brand is your father?"

I shake my head, "No. I have but one father and he sits at the head of this table."

There are nods of approval at various places around the table. But none from Fi. Does she know something that I do not?

"It felt like you believed it," charges Solem, "Thanos certainly thought you believed it."

"Thanos is, was, quite mad."

Solem glares at me. I can see that I have made a new enemy in him.

"At this point Thanos went berserk screaming, 'kill him,' and other mad ravings.

"After that things began to happen very fast. Harlan deserted me, I tried to break the contact, using all my skills in Trumps and could not. I tried to contact other assistance but was thwarted. I tried to Trump away, but again my skills failed me. Psychically and magically my hands were tied. I perceived myself to be in mortal danger, under the control of Thanos, the most powerful mind I know of, and him screaming for my head. I believed I only had split-seconds to act in the only venue left me, physical action. Believing I was defending my life and attacking Thanos, the insane son of a madder father, I struck.

"I was wrong.

"It was not Thanos who received my death blow, but my aunt Llewella. Thanos had somehow evaded me. When I struck the blow it was clearly Thanos I attacked, just as it was clearly not Thanos who received the blow."

"No matter what was said, Thanos would not have killed you. You say my brother was mad but I was part of that contact too and I say he was not. Angry, perhaps, but not mad." He glares at me, "And unlike some in this Family, Thanos was not a killer."

Morgan clears his throat.

Random looks at him and asks, "Do you have something to add?"

Morgan rises, "Majesty, I received a legacy letter from Brand that quite clearly states that it was Thanos who killed Logan as he tried to Walk the Pattern."

Corwin leaps to his feet, "That's ridiculous, Thanos was only seven at the time."

Morgan looks him in the eye, "According to the letter he had already walked the Pattern and I believe that most of us consider that to be time when Family comes into majority."

Random looks at Morgan, "Can this letter be produced?"

Morgan nods.

"We may wish to see it at some other time."

Morgan retakes his seat and all eyes are back on me.

"I do not understand what happened in those final seconds, perhaps I never will. I accept my responsibility for Llewella's death, accidental

though it may have been.

"That is the truth as I see it. I am willing to submit myself to a mind scan by either Random, Benedict, Gérard, or Fiona to confirm the truth of these words.

"I know that many seated around this table have considered my notions of truth and honor childish in a Prince of Amber, but those of you who know me well," I look directly at Fiona and Flora, "know that I would never knowingly attack, let alone kill any of my aunts. I am neither a murder nor an assassin. I have never killed, not even Shadow dwellers, except in battle or while defending myself or others. Most of all, it is not part of my code to slay women; in fact, given the opportunity I would gladly have given my life to defend Llewella, or any of my aunts. Some who do not know me," I look at each of Corwin's children, "May not believe or understand this, but it is my way.

"It may be a childish attitude, but I have always attempted to be the hero my name implies."

I take my seat.

Corwin rises and explains that Aaron emptied a clip from an automatic weapon into Thanos' back as he kneeled over his mother's body, then fled. He murdered his brother despite the fact that he had previously sworn oaths of loyalty to him.

As Corwin is speaking, Random signals that he is getting a Trump call. Caine touches one of the Giant Trumps on the wall and it reveals two strangers in the Throne Room of Amber castle.

Caine brings them through the Giant Trump at Random's request.

The strangers explain that they are Reaper's children and reside in a Patterned realm they call Dross.

Caine works the Trump again and more strangers appear. Altogether there are five men and one woman. The strangers have a wild tale to tell. According to their story, the Courts have been consumed by Primal Chaos and their Lands invaded by fleeing Chaos Lords.

According to the newcomers, the Lords of Chaos blame Caine for their misfortune and woes.

Caine looks at Random and says, "I know something of this matter, but it is none of my doing," as he finishes his denial he looks directly at Deirdre in an obvious challenge.

Deirdre refuses to meet his eyes. A murmur goes round the room. Corwin leaps to his feet and is instantly by his sister's side. Herdan, Sauren, Finndo, and Osric all rise more slowly and walk to Corwin.

Random quickly rises from his chair, "Hold! There will be no factions formed until We can determine the Truth of these matters."

Corwin looks at Random a moment then returns to his seat. The others follow him. Caine is grinning as they take their seats.

After some cajoling, Deirdre admits to destroying the Courts of Chaos.

She apparently did this by increasing 'the gradient of Primal Chaos', whatever the Bloody Hell that means. All of this apparently took place while Random was trapped in The Land of the Dead.

'Bloody mice at play,' I think to myself.

Deirdre concedes that Caine took no part in the proceedings.

While it is true that Caine loves playing Odin, the All-seeing, I do not believe that he could let events of this magnitude pass without taking some sort of role in them. Whatever his part was, Deirdre is either ignorant of it or unwilling to admit what she knows.

As Primal Chaos consumed their Ways, the Lords of Chaos were forced to flee into the nearest stable lands, which turned out to be the Shadows cast by the Dross Pattern. They presently occupy these Shadows despite the Dross Prince's best efforts to evict them.

The only one of the newcomers who does not resemble Reaper is a large bronze skinned individual with fair hair. He seems to be the group's spokesman, if not its leader. He requests that the Throne of Amber aid his family in fending off this encroachment of Chaos into Patterned lands.

Before Random can answer Godfrey points to the Giant Trump on the wall that is currently tuned in to the Throne Room in Amber Castle and yells, "Look."

Almost as one the assembly turns to look into the Card. Several of those undead creatures whose red veins show though their white skins are taking station in the Throne Room. They are being directed by an individual who appears to be quite alive.

"Jeager..."

I think that barely audible hiss came from Harlan but it is difficult to say. I look down to the end of the table and find his chair empty. I glance to my right, toward Morgan's place at the table, and there they are in some secret conference.

Random looks at Harlan, "Tell Us what you know of Jeager."

Harlan swallows hard, "Majesty, since my return from The Land of the Dead I have been able to determine that Jeager, the King of that place, is my father."

"And your mother?"

"I believe that my mother was the Princess Nara."

"Was"

"She has recently been slain by Morgan."

Another murmur, goes round the room.

It is followed by several hushed exchanges between the Elders. Information slides down the table with a rippling wave-like motion. Deirdre, who is seated to my left, breaks the wave by refusing to turn in my direction. Godfrey, who is seated across from me, shrugs, leans forward, and whispers, "Seems Nara and Jeager are Oberon's first born."

"How can that be?"

"Twins," he smiles and adds, "No wonder the old boy was so dead set

against incest!"

Godfrey gives me a wink and a nudge then adds in a conspiratorial tone, "Pass it on." He turns back to his conversation with Merlin.

I pass his news on to Martin who shakes his head and says, "Poor Harlan, no wonder no one but Dworkin would claim him."

Random turns to Caine and says, "Bring Jeager here," in a voice loud enough for all to hear.

"But he wants to kill me," wails Harlan while ducking behind Morgan.

Trump power throbs within the Giant Trump and Jeager materializes next to the King. Even though Caine's move has taken him completely by surprise Jeager manages to maintain a regal presence. I can believe that he is King in the Land of the Dead from his bearing alone.

He looks at Random for several moments, then his eyes run the length of the table. When they light on Harlan he points and angrily demands, "What is that murderer doing here?" He turns to Benedict, "Brother, that lying scum has killed Nara!"

"N-n-no," stammers Harlan.

I meet Jeager's eyes, "'Twas Morgan killed your sister."

Morgan turns to Jeager, looks him straight in the eyes, and says, "I killed her as an enemy of Amber."

In a quiet voice that has a far more sinister quality than his boisterous demands, Jeager informs Morgan that, "I claim my revenge on you."

Morgan smiles and says, "Then you'll have to get in line."

Jeager turns to Random, "I will have justice."

Random's eyes met Jeager's, "Morgan is currently under investigation. Until a moment ago We did not know of his part in your sister's death, this too shall be added to the list of his crimes. Would you join us, Brother?"

Jeager nods and walks over to Random who rises from his seat and hands the circlet of gold that represents Amber's crown in less formal settings to him.

As Jeager takes his crown, Random sighs in relief and explains, "The judgement of this Court is no longer my responsibility."

The room bursts into pandemonium as Random takes a place at the table between Deirdre and myself.

Sweet Bloody Jesus! I turn toward my father but his eyes tell me that now is not the time for questions.

Jeager holds up a hand for silence but it is several moments before the room quiets down.

When the background noise becomes low enough so that he can make himself heard without shouting, Jeager turns to Benedict and says, "Benedict I would not have this hearing now. Who should be imprisoned?"

Morgan rises, "Prince Benedict, I place myself in your custody."

Benedict looks from Morgan to Jeager and says, "Gérard and myself shall act as Morgan and Carolán's jailers."

Benedict steps over to Morgan and takes his weapons.

Gérard comes to collect mine. I hand him Tromperie and then Grayswandir explaining that, "This belongs to Corwin."

Gérard looks at Corwin who shakes his head. Gérard gives Corwin a small shrug then lays Grayswandir next to Tromperie.

The bronze skinned newcomer from Dross rises and asks, "And what of Deirdre's crimes?"

Benedict looks at his sister, "She too shall be taken into custody, as will Harlan."

Jeager looks as though he is going to countermand that last bit, but then thinks better of it. At least he lets Benedict lead the four of us back through the Trump and into Amber.

Just as I'm about to step through the Giant Trump I hear Jeager turn control of the Trump Fortress over to Caine.

Christ Jesus, Father! What have you done?

"How is it possible to expect mankind to take advice when they will not so much as take warning!"

— Jonathan Swift

As the door to the Dungeon slams shut Benedict says, "I imagine that there are many ways one could get out of this cell. But my advice to you is that you stay put." He smiles, "Were you to escape I would have to hunt you down and kill you, but I would prefer not to have to leave Amber at this time. Do you understand?"

I nod through the bars in the oak door, "I cannot speak for these others but I have no intention of running."

"I did not think you would, Carolan. But I'm not as certain of Morgan and Harlan."

"Is Jeager to be King then?"

Benedict sighs, "I do not know."

Not long after Benedict leaves Roger shows up.

When I ask him about Jeager and my father he tells me that the rumor going 'round the Castle is that Random plans to abdicate so that he will not have to pass judgement me.

"Tis bad. 'Tis very bad.

Several hours later I am summoned to Jeager's quarters. Open books are scattered everywhere. He is pacing back and forth with an open volume of the Archival History of Amber in his hand when I arrive. He shoves aside Chronicles of Amber and clears a spot on the table for two glasses. He smiles warmly and offers wine, which I accept more to prove that I am unconcerned over the notion that he might try to poison me than because I am thirsty.

He asks me questions about growing up in Shadow. What was it like coming to Amber as a young man? What was my first sight of Amber like? Though they have nothing to do with the matter-at-hand, he seems genuinely curious about my answers.

I am in the middle of relating how Pegs and I forced the New York bomber to crash land when he suddenly turns on me and says, "You have but one chance to go free. You must implicate Morgan in the death of Nara."

I shrug and say, "I wasn't there when your sister was killed."

"Don't you mean murdered?"

"Isn't that for the law to decide?"

He smiles, "Thanks to your father, I am the Law in Amber."

We glare at one another for awhile. Then he swoops toward me, rises to his full height, and quietly explains, "I understand that you also claim that Llewella's death was an accident!"

His voice rises in volume. "By the Unicorn, were your eyes closed or what? Perhaps if you paid more attention to what you were about, more of the Family would be alive today."

"I..."

"And what of Reaper? Did you watch his head roll across the Dross Pattern? Or were your eyes closed then too?"

"Reaper was an enemy to Amber and the Pattern."

He flashes an insane smile, "Now you sound exactly like your friend Morgan. What of Caine then," he demands, "Was he an enemy of Amber as well? When you took his hand was it to save the Pattern?"

He kicks at the copy of Corwin's Chronicles and screams, "How much of Our blood is on your hands, boy?"

He stops his pacing and takes several deep breaths, a bit of the angry red flush leaves his face and his next question is phrased in almost reasonable tones, "Carolan isn't it?" I nod. "Look Carolan, why do you seek to protect Morgan? He has already publicly confessed to murdering my sister."

"Harlan explained to me what happened and I have heard Morgan admit to killing Nara, but I wasn't there when it happened. The simple truth is, I didn't see who killed your sister, or isn't the Law in Amber interested in the truth any more?"

He slams shut one of the heavier looking tomes that lay open on the table, the boom echoes dramatically creating just the right mood of finality as he pronounces sentence, "Very well then. You choose to run with confessed murders, have committed murdered yourself, and refuse to aid the Crown in an important investigation. To show mercy now would be a sign of weakness as well as a grave mistake. There can be but one end for unrepentant killers such as yourself. You are condemned to die on the morrow. First Morgan, then Harlan, and finally you. It should make for quite the public spectacle. Don't you think?"

"What crime is Harlan guilty of?"

He glares at me, his eyes full of an emotion I can't read, then turns to

one of the guards and orders, "Take the prisoner away."

I am escorted back to my cell.

Jeager is mad! He may have been driven so by his sister's death, but he is mad nonetheless. As mad as Brand or Thanos ever was. As King of Amber his madness will infect all of Shadow. How could father give him the Throne? How could Benedict, Fi, and the rest let him take it?

I sit and fret for an hour or so, then ask Roger if he can get me some paper. He comes back with the Royal, a ream of typing paper, and several bottles of White Out.

An hour later Roger comes to the cell door and informs me that Deirdre's name has been added to the list of those to be executed in the morning. Being unable to implicate Morgan in Nara's death seems to have become a capital offense in Amber.

The evening meal comes with still more news. Jeager has coerced the Dross and Bright Princes into swearing Fealty. He plans a coronation immediately after the executions.

It also seems that Fiona, Merlin, and some of the others, managed to undo what Deirdre did to the Courts. With Primal Chaos in full retreat and the Courts restored, the refugee Chaos Lords have withdrawn from the Dross lands and returned to their Ways. Deirdre it seems is fated to die for nothing.

The crimes of Morgan and myself cannot be undone. No one can bring Llewella, Dameon, or Nara back to life. But Deirdre's plots have all been undone. Why should she die? I cannot believe that Corwin will sit calmly by and let Jeager kill his beloved sister for a failed plot.

In the morning Roger brings news with breakfast. Much has happened during the night.

The good news is that Random sits once more on the Throne of Amber. Roger is uncertain as to Jeager's true fate but Castle rumor has it that Benedict went into his room with a sword and that Jeager never came out. The bad news is that the hearing interrupted by the arrival of the Dross Princes and Jeager will be reconvened this afternoon.

It seems that father was unable to escape the burdens of the Throne after all. For his sake I wish he did not have to decide my fate but at least now I know that his decision will be based on justice. I do not envy father's role in life. To be a king seems easy enough, to be a good King must be the most difficult of tasks.

In the afternoon the Family gathers once more, this time in the Great Hall of Amber Castle. Deirdre has been cleared of any charges against her and sits once more with the Elders. Much of the Royal Court has also assembled for the trial. Aaron, who has been reduced to a protoplasmic state

after killing Thanos, fleeing to the Courts, and unwittingly Trumping into Primal Chaos, temporarily escapes justice.

Bill Roth and all the heavy legal guns are present, and, although much evidence is presented by both sides with a deal of posturing, very little real debate takes place. I can't escape the feeling that all the important decisions have already been made and that this 'trial' is mostly for the Royal Court's benefit.

Morgan is found guilty of Dameon's murder. I am found guilty of Llewella's death although in my case the term murder is scrupulously avoided. Harlan is found guilty of failing to prevent Dameon's murder. And Aaron is found guilty of murdering Thanos.

Random asks the three of us to rise. Aaron, of course, cannot.

"Before We pronounce Our sentence, do any of you wish to address the Court?"

Morgan rises. He makes no attempt to deny any of the charges against him, instead he stands by his belief that, like Benedict, his actions were taken for the good of Amber. If he'd have had medals pinned to his chest he would have looked just like Ollie North.

Harlan has little to say except that he is sorry.

Random looks at me, I rise to my feet, as I begin to speak I can feel every eye in the room on me, "I stand now ready to accept the judgement of my King and my elders in this matter, I accept full responsibility for my aunt Llewella's death. First I would like to say this, however. No physical punishment you could inflict on my body can compare to the guilt I shall carry in this matter, for as long as I live. Some may snicker, but I am not as cynical as some," I turn and look directly at Caine, "and am yet capable of guilt and remorse.

"An immortal life was lost two days ago. Something precious and irreplaceable is gone because of my actions. I will never forget what I have done, and no matter how many shadows I wander through, I can never hide from Llewella or myself.

"Never again can I play at being the hero, the Champion. My misjudgement has cost Llewella her life, but no matter what you decide here today, I will not have escaped unscathed. For today I have lost my innocence; my childhood, if you will. Something that was precious and irreplaceable as well, if only to me.

"I would make only one request of you who would decide my fate: remember that although I may be young, naive, perhaps even stupid, I am nonetheless a Prince of the Blood of Amber. What you do to me you do to Amber. Let my punishment, if it is your will to punish, be with dignity and to her honor.

"Also I would add this warning: it is my opinion that we the Royal Families of Amber, Bright, and now of Dross, as well, are being manipulated by outside forces. I can only guess at their purpose, but they cannot be to the benefit of any of our worlds. Now is a time for standing

together, as we once did against the Black Dragon. Do not let these deaths and our punishments divide you further. Do not let them weaken Amber."

As I sit Random rises, "It is Our decision that the four of you be banished from Our realms forever. At dawn on the morrow you will be driven from the slopes of Kolvir. After forty-eight hours have passed you will no longer be under Our protection. At that time any and all gathered here may do with you, and all who aid or succor you, as they will, and suffer no consequences at Our hands. There are some that feel banishment is too light a sentence. We invite them now to mete out such justice as they deem fitting, but remind all and sundry that no move may be taken against you while you are under Our protection. You have Forty-eight Amber hours, no more, no less. And may the Unicorn guide you.

"More persons are humbugged by believing in nothing than by believing in too much!"

— P. T. Barnum

Roger raps on the door to my cell. I look up from my proof-reading and glance out the Trump window. He's early. 'Tis not yet dawn in the Arden.

His head comes through the door, only to be followed by the rest of his body, "The Princesses Florimel and Fiona would like a moment."

"See them in."

He shoots the Royal a worried look.

Despite my dark mood I cannot prevent a small smile, "But for some final words 'tis done."

He grins and opens the door wider, "Your Highnesses."

Fiona and Flora walk in. Their smiles are almost in unison.

I look from one to the other then ask, "How did you bribe Roger this time?" a chuckle escapes me, "No wonder he says I'm his favorite prisoner."

Fiona smiles and says, "It is good to hear you laugh again, Cory."

Flora nods, "Tearing yourself apart will not bring her back. I know that this is easy for me to say that but," she pauses a moment, "what I mean is..."

When Flora begins to flounder Fiona bails her out by looking at the sheaf of papers in my hands and asking, "We're not disturbing you are we?"

I shake my head, "Just finished."

Fiona looks me in the eyes, "We wanted to have a few private words with you, away from the rest of the Family." She looks over at Flora, "We came together because we're limited for time as it is."

"I wanted to give you this dear," explains Flora as she kisses me on the lips.

When she is done Fiona kisses me on the cheek. As she does so she whispers in my ear, "I will do whatever I can, but I do not know how much

actual help I'll be able to be."

Flora smiles, "Your father asked us to have you meet him and Vialle at Corwin's tomb. That way he doesn't have to show favoritism in front of Morgan and Harlan."

I nod.

Flora smiles, "And I want to show you these."

"What are they?"

Fiona frowns, "The interior designs for your tomb."

Flora nods, "What would you like your epitaph to be, dear?"

Fiona scowls at Flora, "I tried to tell her that bringing these here would be in bad taste."

Flora gets a little pout on her beautiful face.

"Nonsense," I protest, "Nothing Flora does could ever be in bad taste."

Flora beams at me. Fiona shrugs.

"Not that I think you'll be needing a tomb, dear, but you know how much I love interior design."

I smile at Flora and nod.

Fiona smiles and says, "I taught you too well not to be able to survive a hellride, and that is all this is, Cory, a longer, more dangerous, hellride."

Flora nods, "Between what Fiona has taught you and what I have untaught you, no one is better prepared for the journey you are about to embark on than you."

"You make it sound like a grand adventure."

Flora smiles, "And that is how you should think of it."

Fiona nods, "As long as you don't forget to be careful. I want to see you back here in one piece someday."

I frown "The man said forever."

Fiona looks me directly in the eyes, "Nothing is forever, Cory. Look at Osric and Finndo."

There is a knock at the door.

Flora glares evilly at the door.

Fiona shrugs and says, "I'm afraid our time is up Cory."

Roger pokes his head in "Highnesses, Prince Benedict is on his way down. You must be away before he gets here."

They both kiss me one more time and I whisper to them both that, "I'll miss you most of all."

Benedict arrives a short time after my two favorite ladies have left. "I will be your escort to a family meeting at Corwin's tomb. You have fifteen minutes to prepare yourself."

I nod and start to dress. After I dress I gather up my Trumps, Grayswandir, and Tromperie, then look at Benedict and say, "Ready."

Random, Vialle, and Martin are at the tomb, as are Fiona, Flora and Benedict.

We spend some quiet time together and then it is time to leave.

Random puts his arms around me and says, "When I named you my Heir, I never thought it would come to this."

Vialle kisses me, "Take care of yourself Cory."

Martin hugs me and says, "Good luck, little brother."

I smile at him and reply, "Guess this qualifies me for Black Sheep of the family now."

He squeezes me one more time, "Luck."

Fiona kisses me and says, "The Pattern does not forget its own."

Flora kisses me and I wipe a bit of moisture off her cheek. "He never stopped believing in or loving Amber."

"Huh..what?"

"My epitaph."

"Oh. Take care of yourself, Cory, please?"

I nod.

I walk back to Random and take his hand, "When you get the chance, tell mother I love her."

He nods.

I start to turn away then stop, "When was the last time I told you I loved you?"

"Back in 'Texarami."

I hug him, "I love you Dad."

He squeezes me back, "I love you son."

"Take care of Amber while I'm gone."

"I will."

Benedict leads us all down the stairs in silence.

Most of the family is gathered at the bottom of the stairs cut into Kolvir's slope.

I walk over to Caine, "I'd say goodbye Uncle but I suspect we'll be seeing one another soon enough."

He smiles, "Undoubtedly."

I walk over to Herdan, "Dennifer never made it?"

He shakes his head, "I couldn't locate her."

"Is she in some sort of trouble do you think?"

He shrugs, then looks me in the eyes and says, "I'll keep looking for her."

"Thanks."

I look at Morgan and he shrugs. I walk over to Harlan, "Said all your goodbyes?"

He nods.

Just as I am about to point out that the Sun is fully risen, four handsome young men and a light grey wolf Pattern in next to Morgan.

The one who I saw just before Morgan murdered Dameon has a look of triumph on his face, "See, I told you I could do it."

The one with brown hair shrugs and says, "Big deal."

I walk back to Morgan and quietly complain, "You let them walk the Pattern?"

He shrugs, "I wasn't exactly in a position to stop them, was I?"

"Where's the girl, the one you showed me before?"

Morgan looks at the tallest of his four sons, "Where are your sisters?"

He shrugs, "I dunno. When Morwena got to the center of the Pattern they simply vanished."

The youngest looking one, who has black hair and doesn't seem to resemble Morgan all that much says, "I think they wanted to rescue you or something. Guess they didn't find you, huh? How'd you get loose?"

Morgan explains the terms of our banishment to his sons. Who all immediately agree to accompany us into exile.

I turn to Morgan, "Do they understand what this banishment means. Do they realize how dangerous the people coming after us are going to be?"

"I made them aware of what Amber was like when they were growing up."

"I suspect you taught them very little fear for our enemies. Fearless soldiers make better warriors and all that."

He shrugs, "They are pack creatures, sticking together is part of their nature."

"Then where is their sister?"

"Sisters, there are two, Morwenna and Siggan."

"If they're so good at sticking together what has happened to them?"

"I don't know."

I look at Morgan, "They could be in trouble."

The white haired one who has apparently brought his brothers to us, looks at the tall one and says, "They'll be in even more trouble if they show up here. If that bitch ever talks to me like that again I'll make her regret it."

Morgan looks at the tall one, "What is going on Thufir?"

The tall one shrugs again, "Morgunt and Morwenna had a disagreement over raping the guards mind."

"I was the one got us into the Pattern room, not her. And what's she do as soon as she walks the Pattern? Disappear! That's what. What happened to Pack integrity and all that strength in unity crap?"

The brown haired one says, "Lay off Morwena. This is neither the time nor place for one of our family squabbles, you morons."

"Dad, Rudra ate some of the guards!" tattles Morgunt.

I look at Morgan in horror, "He ate Benedict's guards?"

Morgan looks at his children and shakes his head.

"Benedict was one of the few Family members we hadn't managed to antagonize yet."

Morgan glares at the tall one, "Thufir, I thought I left you in charge."

"Yeah right, like they listen to me."

"Morgan?"

"Yes?"

"You were right."

He shakes his head, "About what?"

"They're not being ready..."

He looks at them a moment then stalks over to the wolf and begins rubbing its neck and ears.

Must be the little woman, I think to myself.

The dark haired one walks up to his parents, "Hey Dad, what do we do next?"

Morgan lets loose a very deep sigh and says, "Well Storm, I guess we hunt for your sisters."

Caine walks over and says, "That won't be necessary, I have them."

I look at Caine, "What about our forty-eight hours of protection?"

"It does not apply to anyone who is not an actual exile." He looks at Morgan, "Your sons have accepted your exile and are now protected, but the two lovely young ladies are not."

"What do you want?" asks Morgan in an icy voice.

"I propose to trade your daughters for Carolan."

Morgan looks daggers into Caine's eyes, "I think not! Return my daughters to me now."

"And if I don't"

"We make war here and now!"

Our conversation is beginning to attract attention.

Caine looks over at Random and Benedict and back to Morgan. He flashes Morgan a brilliant smile and says, "Since this hardly seems like the time or place for a war I return your children to you."

There is a burst of rainbow colors and two young women appear. One is the tall white-haired one I saw at the pool, the other has auburn hair.

Caine turns to me and says, "You see, I do have some notions of chivalry after all." Then walks away.

I look at Morgan, "The Bloody Bastard was just trying establish how much control he has over us."

Morgan nods, "His day will come."

My foot leaves the last step cut into Kolvir's slope for what may be the final time. Roger walks with us into the Arden. In a moment I will hand him this journal. While there are still many things left to be said, I have run out of time in which to say them. Fare thee well whoever you are. And know this, I'll be back!

*"I will not be revenged, and this I own to my enemy;
but I will remember, and this I owe to myself."*

— Charles C. Colton



*It's not a
Game!*

Done!

As this is the last installment of *The View from a Dungeon Cell* Erick has asked me to say a few words. I am probably not capable of saying a 'few' words, but I will take the opportunity offered to leave you with a few final thoughts written in my own voice and not Carolan's. After spending the last year or so writing Bloody this and Bloody that it seems a little strange.

From this point on, unless a ground swell of reader demand can convince Erick otherwise, you will have to follow Carolan's story in Cathy Klessig's *Wolfling Logs*. *The View From a Dungeon Cell* ends with what I intended to be a feeling of closure, but the Story it begins doesn't really end until Carolan has a last encounter with his uncle Caine in the Greyfall Universe. A word about Cathy's logs. I do not do accents or idiom. I have always wished that I could but I just don't seem to have any flair for it. When Carolan speaks in the *Wolfling Logs* it will be with a voice you will not recognize, mine. This is not Cathy's fault, my voice is all she has to work with. You will just have to imagine the

'Bloody's' and "Sweet Jesus's" (which Carolan would pronounce Jaays-us) for yourself, unless of course you can convince Erick that you really want to learn the rest of his story from Carolan himself.

While we are on idiom, I would like to address something that has bothered me since *Amberzine* #3 was published. Upon rereading the section in which Carolan is talking about getting drunk for the first time, I realized that I may not have made it clear to readers unfamiliar with Irish idiom that when Carolan describes himself as getting pissed that he means drunk and not angry.

A last observation on Carolan's accent, he pronounces his name Carlan, as though there were no 'O' and it was one syllable.

The View From a Dungeon Cell depicts a portion of Carolan's story in which he lost much of his innocence. It marks a fork in his Road of Life, a turning from the Path Not Taken onto the one he now walks. It also represents a crossroads to me and the way in which I relate to our hobby. At the time of Llewella's death I, as a player, felt guiltless. In fact, I

felt that I had been screwed over by my Game Master. That I had been, as some of us who know and love the man are prone to say, Wujjed.

Even though I have heard Erick explanations for Llewella's death several times, I still don't understand how or why it happened. But that's not what's important, what is important is that I decided at the time of the Wolfling Campaign's opening session that even though Don could ignore what had happened and go on feeling blameless, Carolan could not. I did not realize it until several years later but that is when I took my first step away from gaming and into pure role playing. I didn't understand it at the time, but I had accepted a responsibility to my character and, perhaps more importantly, to the story his life creates, that 'gamers' are under no obligation to embrace.

I could have kept on playing Carolan as the Shadow Knight Errant he imagined himself to be. That, after all, was the character I wanted to play, but I did not. And history was made (well, maybe not history) and that was the day Carolan was born. Whether I realized it or not, this is when Carolan stopped being a character, a mere collection of words and numbers in a blue folder, and became 'real'.

Much of Carolan's Diary was written years after the

campaign sessions took place. Though I did my best to avoid letting Carolan's present day attitudes color his thoughts from those early days, I did let certain anachronistic elements of Zelazny's writings slip in. For instance, in 1985 none of us were familiar with the term Ways as it relates to Chaos. Yet I have Merlin and Carolan both use it. I view these and other small inaccuracies as artistic license and hope that you are able to accept them as such. I would also like to apologize to any of my fellow players who I may have offended by putting words into their character's mouths that they feel were inappropriate. At any rate, *The View From a Dungeon Cell* is not a record of the way those early days unfolded, just the way Carolan chooses to remember them.

What are my favorite parts of the story? I have to confess that some of my favorite pieces are the parts that never happened or barely happened. In eight years I missed only one session. It was the one where the group pulls Deirdre and Brand out of the Abyss. It was a real challenge to make Carolan appear to be in the middle of the action even though he doesn't do anything.

Carolan's meeting with Meriad, the Queen of Chaos, is based on: *I wake up in Chaos as Merlin's prisoner*. And the question, "*Do I have a Trump of the Queen?*" To which Erick

answered yes. I do not claim to have created Meriad, however. I just elaborated on Erick's brief description.

Had his description of Lotania, in a similar phone conversation, been as brief as the one of Meriad, then the section that contains Carolan's romance with the Trump Mistress of Rotel might have as brief as his encounter with the Queen of Chaos. But I caught Erick in a talkative mood that day, and he supplied me with five hand written pages on Lotania.

My notes on the encounter read like this:

I work on getting Lotania, the Trump Mistress in Rotel, as a lover. She is more difficult to seduce than I am use to.

Finally!

She poses for me nude.

I spend all my allotted 'down time' with her.

Talk about terse, but then Carolan was on vacation, and I knew that the fate of the Universe didn't hang on Erick's every word. My playing notes, at any rate, were never what one would describe as verbose. I have yet to figure out a way to role-play and take notes at the same time, and in those early days we hadn't yet resorted to tape recorders. Much my reconstruction is based on the compilations of Dan Clemens (the first year) and Don Anderson (the second year).

There is one more thing I would like to get off my chest. When I created Carolan I spent nine points on Shadows. One was Texorami and one was the Shadow Earth but the rest were all shadows of my creation. In eight years I have never been to one of these places. Actually I started out the Campaign in Aquarella and briefly passed through Annwyn in the first session. Twice now, my descriptions of these places have been expunged from these pages. It is almost like they don't exist but they do. These were the places where Carolan played hero. I think they are important to his story. Alas, no else seems to agree! Whew, that felt good!

I hope that Carolan's Dairy has helped to give Amber players and Game Masters, those who have never had the benefit of sitting down at a table with Erick, some notion of what an Amber campaign is like. However, please keep in mind that it is not a Group or Public Log, it does not record everything that happened those first two years, just the stuff that Carolan was around for. For instance, Morgan visits Bright early in the first year, he talks to Corwin and has a pretty good idea of what is going on there. Morgan just never saw fit to inform Carolan of his trip.

I also hope that you've managed to pick up some ideas on character background and development, even if I did have

to shoe horn in the parts that survived.

I would like to leave you with a few dedications and acknowledgements. I hope you will indulge me in this. *Carolán's Diary: The View From a Dungeon Cell* is for:

My mother and father, without whom none of this could have been possible.

Brian, for trying to understand.

Wendy, just because.

Cathlin, for the plundering of her accent.

Mr. Kearis, my eleventh grade English teacher, who told me I couldn't write.

Reg, for making Mr. Kearis look wrong.

Bronwyn, whose *Tale* inspired me to tell Carolán's story.

Carol, who gave life and words to Bronwyn.

Erick, who forced me to finally put the words locked inside onto paper.

Mike, for giving me Morgan, the perfect foil for Carolán.

everyone who played in the original campaign, Amber and Bright.

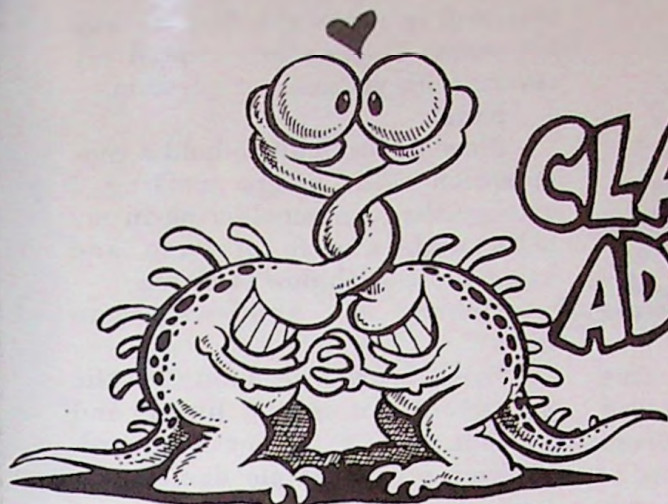
As trite as it sounds it really is true that there isn't enough time or space to mention everyone one would like to mention. I guess I'll just have to write something else so I can get to do more acknowledgements. To all my friends in Michigan, New Jersey, Iowa, and Utah, Thanks! And while I am at it I would also like to thank you, my reader, its been a blast.

Don Woodward
Eastpointe, 1993

mino's adventures

"1 Dated a Cipher"





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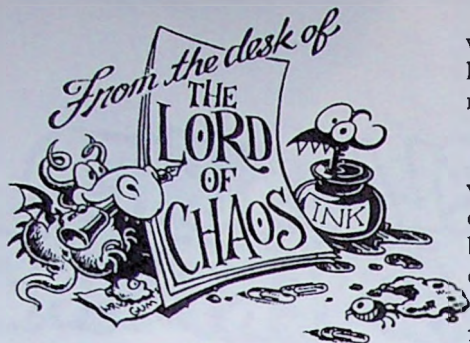
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Sitting down at my evening meal, I eyed the dishes arrayed before me; judging from outward appearances, it promised to be a rather pleasant repast. (Though it's best to keep in mind that, especially in Chaos, judging by appearances can be a fatal mistake.) There were the usual appetizers-tightly covered, of course, to keep them from either crawling away or eating the entree.

I took a sip of the vitriolic aperitif presented to me. Yum, this would do nicely to stimulate digestion and cleanse the palate.

"Give my complements to the alchemist. This is superb!" My attendant gave a reserved nod. I inquired, "Have you seen Eugene? It's not like him to be late for a meal."

With just the slightest hint of disapproval he replied, "I believe he is wallowing in the pâté, sire." He never did care for Eugene's disdain for decorum.

Uncapping one of the appetizers, I plucked out a juicy morsel that looked like an even match for Eugene and tossed it into the pâté with a warning, "here, try one of these." Simon just rolled his eyes and returned to the kitchen while the melee ensued. All in all, it was an exquisite meal.

Relishing the postprandial torpor and savoring the smoke, all

was well in my world. But, as was his want, Eugene interrupted my reverie with yet another question.

Kids!

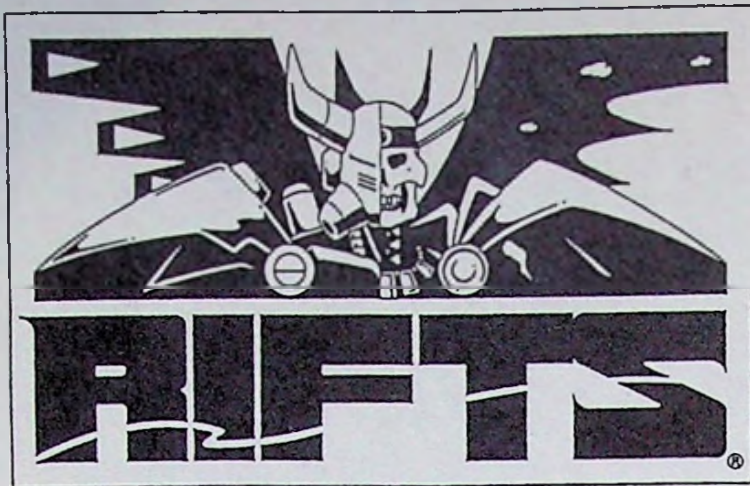
Since it's difficult to hold a conversation while you're smoking, I extinguished the smoldering in my belly with a gulp of wine and exhaled a final billow of steam.

"Where do Shadows come from?"

"Well, bearing in mind that the universe is not strictly linear, and without getting too metaphysical, I'll give you a simple demonstration," I said while reaching for a candle and the salt cellar. I placed them both on the table in close proximity, and pointed to the far side of the salt, saying, "*that* is a Shadow, and it exists because the salt is interfering with the flow of light from the candle. Now, do you see how the shadow is fairly representative of the shape of the salt shaker when the salt is close to the candle, but it gets more distorted as the distance increases?"

At this point, I grabbed another candle and the pepper, and I proceeded to place them in opposition to the original pair, candles outermost, making sure the shadows overlapped. "Observe how two light sources cause each of the objects to cast a shadow in each direction. Please also note that the shadows each have their own hue, and that where they intersect there a different appearance. *That* is where Shadows come from!"

After receiving a puzzled interrogative I replied, "What do you mean? It has *everything* to do with Shadows between Amber and Chaos! But I'll leave that for you to ponder. Care for an after dinner mint? No? Well, *I'm* not too tired, and I don't mind if I do."



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